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THE VERY MAN

When Nick gave up his job as an industrial designer in Hollywood, left his wife and flew off to New York after his secretary, Del, he staked his whole future happiness on his ability to win her affection and love. Here is the story of how one man had to choose between his personal integrity and his career, his love for the girl he wanted to marry and his own way of life amongst the bustling, go-getting New York business world.

By the same author

THE HIDDEN HERO

THE PHILANDERER

A CHANGE OF CLIMATE

STANLEY KAUFFMANN



THE VERY MAN

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by Stanley Kauffmann

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TO
LAURA

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“Don’t brood too much,” she wrote to Helen, “on the superiority of the unseen to the seen. It’s true, but to brood on it is mediaeval. Our business is not to contrast the two, but to reconcile them.”

E. M. FORSTER: *Howard’s End*.

Part One

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"Is it possible," cried Candide, "my lord, that you are— it is not possible—otherwise you are so very like—the Abbé of Perigord."

"I am the very man," answered the Abbé.

Upon this Candide started back and, with his usual ingenuousness, said, "Are you happy, Master Abbé?"

[I]

"I LOVE you" is a phrase that one uses with the greatest of ease or the greatest of difficulty, and sincerity is not necessarily the determining factor. M. L. Nicholas had used it only twice in his life; the first time he had done it easily, the second time with some anguish. Both times he had meant it and the second time much more.

He could hardly remember why he had said it to his wife; but he could hardly stop thinking of why he had said it to this girl. She sat facing him now across his desk as he talked on the intercom, and their eyes, intent upon each other, made a different conversation while he spoke into the mouthpiece.

He put it down at last and said to Del, "That was Wank. He's coming in about the new designs. We can't talk here, Del. Meet me tonight."

"I'd hate to," she said.

"Please. Iris is busy. We'll go to dinner at that sea-food place in Santa Monica. Please."

She looked down at her fists, then looked up again. "All right. I suppose we've got to."

"I'll pick you up at six. The usual place."

"The usual corner, you mean."

"Del, that was your idea. I'll gladly call for you at your house."

"No; then there'll have to be explanations at home. Make it the corner, then." She said, "Nick."

"Yes, sweet Del?"

She was quiet a moment, then she turned and started out of the office. Before she got to the door Mr. Wank opened it.

"Hello, darling," he said.

"Hello, Mr. Wank," she said as she went out and closed the door behind her.

"How are you, boy?" Mr. Wank was the president and owner of the manufacturing firm for which Nick was the designer. He had a thin, straight moustache made up of clearly individual hairs, and a cordial manner, and he was always spotlessly if cashily dressed. He had a portfolio under his arm which he now laid on Nick's desk.

"Boy," he said, "they're terrific. With those extra touches, terrific."

"Oh, really?" Nick, pleased, sounded as if he were surprised, although he wasn't. "Well, they're still not finished."

"Of course. I took that into consideration. But I know ideas and style when I see them. And most of all I know what sells." He tapped the portfolio with a heavy, knowing finger. "This is it."

"Well, good."

"Of course I got even a few more suggestions. You'd expect that."

"Of course."

"But some of those ideas. That skillet, for instance. Where'd you get the idea of putting those holes on the inside?"

"Oh, the scoring on the bottom. Well, just from my own experience in frying things and hearing people talk. The little holes give the effect of a grill—they keep the food from sticking but they're small enough so that the bottom is still smooth."

"Wonderful idea. They'll all be copying it. We've got to rush it along." He turned some sheets in the portfolio. "But, Nick, admit something. That extra little ornament, those strips along the handles, they make it look richer, don't they?"

"You probably have a point there, Marvin."

"Well, boy, that's why I enjoy working with you. You grasp the other fellow's concept. And you can put it into shape. Which is more than I could." He sighed. "Okay. Now one more point about the handles. You say phenolic plastic."

"That's right."

"But solid. Why solid?"

"I want to give those pot handles weight. We can shape them better than the old wooden handles, but the trouble with plastic is it feels flimsy even when it's strong. I want to give it a better heft in the hand."

"Mmm, I don't know. I'll have to talk about it with Production. A hollow handle would be just as strong, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, for all practical purposes."

"And the air inside would be extra insulation."

"You don't have to worry about that. Phenolic is a wonderful insulator."

"Well, frankly, Nick, I'm thinking in terms of unit cost. A few cents on each item, it adds up to something on the long haul. I'll see. If it has to be hollow, you won't pull an artistic tantrum on me, will you?" He grinned.

"Marvin, it's your decision."

Mr. Wank punched him lightly on the shoulder. "I was only kidding. I know you. The real point is, I think they're terrific." He closed the portfolio. "Nick, when does your contract come up for renewal?"

Nick surmised that Wank had looked it up in the files just before he came in, but he answered, "In six weeks. We're supposed to make up our minds, you and I, inside of three weeks."

"Uh-huh. Say, are you and your wife busy next week-end? I don't think you've ever been up to our place near Arrowhead. Why don't you and your good lady come out with us on Friday night? A couple of days of the simple life."

"Why, that sounds very nice, Marvin. Thanks a lot. I'll speak to Iris tonight and see how the week-end is fixed. Can I let you know tomorrow?"

"Sure. And be sure to give that beautiful girl my best."

"Thank you, I will."

A description of M. L. Nicholas must begin with the two things most immediately to be perceived about him: his height

and his energy. He was a short man, just over five feet seven, neatly proportioned. He always moved rapidly—not nervously but energetically. He gave the impression that, without harassment, he was aware that his life, no matter how long, could not be long enough.

Because he looked somehow well-made and deft, people liked him. Men liked him especially, because of his size. Given a choice between two men equally congenial, a man will choose the company of the one shorter than himself.

And, too, Nick's energy made him generous, therefore friendly and attractive. People liked him to cook for their special buffets or to build unique coffee tables for them or to dash off freehand murals in their foyers. They were grateful for these favours and didn't know that he enjoyed merely doing them; he often forgot in the middle of such a task whether he was doing it for himself or a friend. In addition he had the knack of making a day spent in pleasant small accomplishments feel like a long and honourable campaign. This attribute is consoling to people who like to spend their time on trifles, which group included many of the people he knew.

He was quite aware that some people knew of his background and liked to have him on their string of acquaintances as a curiosity. Just as they would have been glad to know a man who had been on an Olympic team or had won a Pulitzer Prize, as once they might have been sure to know one Communist, so they enjoyed a silly sense of lordliness in displaying the scion of a well-known Massachusetts family, a descendant of an ambassador and a Secretary of State and a governor. (And, he always added when the subject was raised, a clipper captain who traded in opium.) Early in his business life he had tried to drop or avoid those who were impressed by his ancestors, but he soon saw this to be fatuous. If he had been a Frenchman and hostesses had found his accent an extra asset, he would have been left virtually friendless if he had resented it. He restrained himself from an excess of integrity and

modesty and allowed himself to be used socially. Either people were soon bored with his ancestors and were in themselves interesting, or they were soon bored with his ancestors and were uninteresting.

Nick was unlike most people he knew in that he usually worked quite hard and was quite gifted; and while many of them were cynics almost to the point where the cynicism became sensual, he let the day's achievement justify the day. He had often congratulated himself on the rare equanimity of his life until he met Del.

Nick kept an electric shaver and some shirts in the wash-room off his office. He worked late that night, then shaved and changed his shirt. As he knotted his tie and looked at himself in the mirror, he seemed to peer through his face at a complex of teasing new joy and dread of complication. He hoped this insight was his alone. For practice, he assumed what he considered his normal expression and made inner notes of how it felt so that he could repeat and sustain the expression in public.

It was only about four months since Del had started work. It scarcely seemed possible that there had actually been a time when she had come into the office to apply for the job, when they had confronted each other merely as forms and names. He tried to remember what he had first thought of her and could think only of her pale cheeks, her round brown eyes, and a kind of swift, stiff grace. One small thing he could remember: he hadn't thought her pretty until she started to speak; the words had come out with a choice, a niceness, that signified her as a person of quality, especially since behind the crispness he could sense a trembling and a reserve. As she talked she had begun to be real to him, but he knew that the reality he saw was a mask; she was a very private person. And that had interested him too; it had made her not especially pretty face seem more attractive.

Some things she had said that day stuck in his mind. After

she told him that she had gone to U.C.L.A. for two years and then had attended secretarial school, he had asked her whether she had any job experience. She said she had worked for two months as secretary to Gaya Graves.

"Oh, the—er—picture star." He had felt a trifle embarrassed at recognizing the name so quickly.

"Yes."

"May I ask what happened?"

"Of course. I quit. It was a little too crazy. The hours. Besides I was tired of packing her into bed when she got falling-down drunk."

Somehow, inexplicably, that last had made him feel good: as if she were not merely telling him facts, but taking him briskly into her confidence.

Then he had asked her, because the personnel manager required it, about her private life. She told him she was single and he asked her whether she lived at home. She said, "Doesn't everyone?"

He had laughed and she had looked at him with an unsmiling little quaver that indicated she was pleased to have made him laugh. Then he had asked her to take a steno test, and had discovered something else about her. Her shorthand and typing were flawless. But flawless, he discovered, in an unusual way.

After she began to work for him and he saw that she was incomparably the best secretary he had ever had or heard of, he learned that she was savagely particular about her work. With one letter he dictated, he asked her to enclose a memo that his former secretary had typed before she left. Delia retyped the memo.

"Why?" he asked. "What was wrong with it?"

"I—I'm sorry," she said and shrugged. She frequently stuttered when she was the least bit disturbed. "I—I know she was your secretary and very nice and so on, but I just don't call that good typing."

"Why *not*?"

"L-look at the spacing. It's spotty. And some words lighter than others. Like there."

"Do you know you're slightly nuts?"

"I can't help it. I like it to look nice. Of course, if you tell me not to bother——"

He raised both hands. "Don't let me interfere."

He thought for the first couple of weeks about this passion for perfection (wondering too why he thought so much about it). She wasn't spinsterish or clerical; she was tigerish, almost passionate, about it. At first he thought it was merely an honesty rare these days, an insistence on giving full measure for a salary; then he sensed something more. He knew little about her as yet, but he thought there was an element almost of desperation in it, an air of "Well, my God, if I can't do anything else, if I'm a flop at everything else in life, at least I can do good shorthand and type well."

Instead of scaring him off, this air attracted him. He wanted to know more about what had caused it. Granting that it really existed.

The day of the retyped memo was the day she said, perhaps mildly vindictively, "May I ask something? It's killing me. What does M. L. stand for?"

"My first name is Marion," he said. "My enemies all call me that. My friends call me Nick."

"I don't think it's such a bad name."

"Please. I've hated it for thirty-five years. I don't want to change now."

"S-so what's the L?"

"LeVerrier. A family name. It's French for, 'The Glass-maker.'"

"That's kind of nice. I don't think that's so bad either."

"Miss Vanderhoff, I see I'm going to have trouble with you."

"Oh." Her small mouth remained round for a moment, while her cheeks blanched and one eyebrow rose. "Why do you say that?"

He felt as if he had stabbed her. "I don't know. It's just a joke. I didn't mean it," he said. "Honestly."

"All right."

"What do they call you? Any special name?"

She shrugged. "Just Delia. In school they sometimes called me Van."

He studied her. "I make it Del. I'll call you Del."

"Why?"

"I like to choose names for people sometimes. Delia's a pretty name, but let's make it Del. Okay, Del?"

She blushed. "Gee, it's just as if we'd put up chintz curtains. Makes the place feel homey."

Through trifles, small favours, small teasings, they worked their way into each other's reflexes and anticipations and dreams, through the daily door-openings and letters answered and lunches ordered and teas made by her in the little closet and taken together at four. ("I *love* tea. I'd love to make it every day. I don't care so much about the tea, I just like having it. The nicest thing about working for Graves was that every afternoon the houseboy brought tea.")

Once in a while they stumbled on important things about each other.

He came in early from lunch one day and found her sitting at her desk with one leg tucked under her, munching an apple and reading one of the bound volumes of a design magazine he kept in the office. He walked across the thick carpet to her side. He said, "Wha——"

"Oh!" She seemed to leap into the air like a deer and come down in the same position.

"For God's sake, it's only me."

"I didn't hear you."

"Do you always jump like that—just because you don't hear someone coming?"

"Well, I—I don't do it on purpose," she said a little sharply.

"You're pretty high-strung."

"S-s-so I'm high-strung."

"So I'll wear a bell," he said. "What's that you're reading?" He glanced at the page. "How'd you happen to get on to that?"

"Snooping. *You'd* never tell me you write articles."

"I haven't written any for some time. How do you like it?"

"I don't know. I can't understand a quarter of it. I think some of these drawings are wonderful. The space modulator and the kinetic light machine, whatever they are."

He glanced at them and remembered the studio in which he had done them, and remembered certain ambitions. "Not bad. I could fix 'em up a bit now."

"With Mr. Wank's strips?" She evidently regretted it the moment she uttered it and waited for him to be angry, like a child expecting chastisement.

He smiled to reassure her. "Easy. Lean back. Breathe deeply. My honour is safe."

"Y-you're right. Why should I get upset about your designs if you're not?"

Gently he said, "Aren't you taking things a touch too seriously?"

"Oh. Sure. Probably," she said, and her lips grew pale. He knew this meant she was piqued.

"All right," he said. "All right, Del. I like you to take things seriously."

She looked up at him with a puzzled, pleased look and he wanted to kiss her. "All right, then. I will," she said. "Anyway, as far as I can."

Day after soft, inquisitive day knitted and wove at a thousand places between them, spoken, touched, felt, remembered and hoped for. Those trifling daily joinings—even more than the lunches together, the two dinners, the one play, the one concert—had worked the alchemy for him. One day between letters they happened to talk about movies. She had lived all her life on the edge of the movie world and was rather pointedly unimpressed with synthetic glamour; but ordinary everyday activities, in addition to her experience with Gaya Graves,

had brought her into contact with a number of movie people and had provided her with some wry stories.

"I keep forgetting that people actually grow up in Hollywood," he said. "I always think of them as coming here."

"We're a dying race. When I was a baby in a carriage I was wheeled through a scene they shot on La Cienega. I made three dollars before I could walk."

"Were your parents in pictures?"

She laughed for about ten seconds, in her quiet, contained way, then apologized. "I'm sorry. If you knew my mother. . . . My father was a dentist. Is. They're divorced and he moved to Berkeley. Mother works at Bullock's, in handbags. Movies, yet!"

"I can see I've been witty."

"Why, she was even nervous when I began to be friends with Gloria when we were both thirteen."

"Who's Gloria?"

"Gloria Hill. She was in pictures until a few years ago."

"I remember. She used to sing, with shining eyes, and melt the hearts of crusty old millionaires."

"You be careful, sir. I adore her."

"Oh."

"And her husband. *And* her two babies."

He saw Del sitting in an imaginary Beverly Hills patio playing with two small children and a former teen-age movie star now twentyish and plumper, and this seemed to give her new garments of tenderness and intercourse and affection. He suddenly wished that he had always known her, had seen her scrape her knees as a child and hate boys and begin to like boys and drowse through boring adolescent Sunday afternoons.

"I'm glad you adore them," he said. "I don't know why, but I am."

She hesitated. "Y-you want to know what she did for me once?"

"Yes," he said firmly.

"Well, she was going to be on a radio show and we both

loved a certain Schubert piano thing and she wanted to sing it. So I wrote the words; and before she sang it, she announced, 'With special lyrics by Miss Delia Vanderhoff.' H-how do you like that?" she said defiantly.

"I like it."

"Pretty small potatoes to you, I suppose," she said equally defiantly.

"I said I like it. Calm down."

"Y-yes, sir." She picked up her steno pad and held her pencil poised.

"Memo to M.W.," he said. Then he said, "Which Schubert piece?"

She looked up at him and blushed. "The Impromptu No. 2." Then she looked at her pad and said, "Well, old M.W. is waiting."

Against all the close and pleasant interchanges and flickerings in the office beat the counterpoint of Iris, making this life here seem daily warmer, more real, more delighting and sad. At home there was just cool sufferance, nothing felt; quarrels were rare. With Del there was everything: even the sharp moments of terror and regret.

He thought of that afternoon a month ago, when they had been sitting quietly, had been talking about the fact that his contract would be up in the fall. Suddenly he had said, with an honesty that enveloped him in smooth happiness, "I don't know how I can leave here. I don't know how I can live without you."

Del had looked as if a sarcophagus of ice had been instantly struck from her; and what was left was not flaming, furious to emerge, but was quiet and small.

"Oh, you fool," she had said, her mouth trembling, "you fool." Then she had run into his washroom. She said later that she had been crying; but he knew that she had been sick with excitement or fear.

When she came out, Wank was there. Nick had not been able to talk to her again for an hour. Then he had put it into

words. "Just so there's no mistake. I meant that I love you."

"I don't know what to do," she had said, looking at his lapel. "I don't know what to do or say."

"Me neither," he said.

They had been able to manage a few evenings together in out-of-the-way restaurants, a movie in North Hollywood. There had been a few kisses—kisses so warm and meaningful that they had a kind of innocence. They had taken him back to the days when all he had expected from a girl was a kiss and therefore had had to tell all in a kiss.

But time was running out. Love could not live on dinners in back booths in Chinese restaurants and on double features. It had to be transplanted or perish. And so he apprehended a great motion in his life: and could almost feel resentment at her, in a perverse way, for having been unhappy enough to force its coming.

[2]

YEARS ago Nick had dreamed of having a good job that he obtained for himself without influence; of having sufficient money without being helped by his mother; of marrying a beautiful wife with long chestnut hair. He had achieved these three aims absolutely. Iris even wore her hair in a bun.

The fact that she fulfilled his pre-adolescent specifications had been a subject of jocularities between him and Iris the night they first met. He supposed that it had played more of a part in his wanting her than he was willing, in good sense, to admit. Indeed, he had tried in the last four or five weeks to understand why he *had* married her. In their three years together, almost all of which had been cool, he had not often bothered to analyse the reasons; they had simply continued to live together. Now he probed.

She was intelligent, she was extremely tasteful, she was poised and articulate. She had been a model and an actress *manquée* (mostly in television commercials, where she was engaged to smoke cigarettes and, as she exhaled, to look as if she had glimpsed the Second Coming). She was exquisitely, breath-takingly beautiful in a long-nosed Grecian way, but without sternness. Even while you were looking at her, you felt it could not possibly be entirely true: some of it must be done with wax or paint. The real reason you thought it could not be true was because it was not merely a beautiful face; it was a most subtly cruel one, and subconsciously you wanted to disprove the cruelty.

He sometimes wondered—again much more often recently than earlier—why Iris had married him. She had known his family had money, but she also had known he supported himself. She had thought he was gifted, but even now she wasn't really interested in his work and was quite content for him to float along in comfortable job channels. He knew she had once found him attractive; but he also knew that lately it was much less actively true than remembered. He could almost see her, as if for sustenance, referring back to the fact that she had once found him attractive.

One night after dinner a few months ago he had put the question aloud when they were discussing another couple's marriage. "Well," he had asked, "could you possibly say why *you* married *me*?"

She had considered it carefully, the air around her head still and perfumed. "I think so. You're good for my nerves. You do right things. You're settled. In a very good way for me at least."

He hadn't cracked open this reply to anatomize it. He was content with this view of him as it was, even vaguely pleased. For, in a quite different perspective, but with the same net result, it was his view of her. To be married to Iris was to repose in a cool, sustaining climate, to dwell on an interminable plateau, perfectly landscaped, where nothing was required of him except not to disturb the arrangements. To this degree she had made a good home for him; and he had for a couple of years identified a happy life with the idea of absence of eruption. Oh, there was steel in Iris, nicely barbed; and sometimes one or the other of them, tactfully and with the other's tacit approval, provoked a minor quarrel just so that they could try the other's mettle. But the rapiers were buttoned; no blood was drawn. For the most part the food and the apartment looked beautiful; his arm (in public) and his bed (in private) were well decorated; and they behaved according to a code of doing the right thing as rigorously as any Brahmin. The right thing, in their environment, meant dressing just fashionably

enough, knowing amusing people, and having plenty of interests. For a long time he had thought himself lucky to have made such a good bargain with life. He wasn't stupid and he knew that this was not all that life could afford; still, it was much more than he saw in the lives of so many married people who frequented the couches of analysts and lovers.

As he drove out through Beverly Hills to Wilshire Boulevard under the long twilight sky, he wondered whether Iris had any idea of what had been happening within him lately, whether that might be behind her news of last night, her dinner date tonight. They had gone to a party yesterday at the home of a costume designer for one of the picture studios, and all through drinks and the barbecue dinner, Nick had seen Iris willingly enmeshed in conversation with a man named Bobby Schlossman. They had met Schlossman at some other party, and Nick knew that he was a producer of TV films. Iris had brightened when she saw him and had wasted no time in capturing him. Nick half expected her news as they drove home; at least it produced no surprise in him.

He said, "I see you got to talk a bit to Schlossman."

"A bit? We were at it practically the whole time."

"I know. I was being funny. Settle the fate of nations? Or of TV?"

"Well, if you can manage to restrain that dazzling wit for a minute, it *was* something about TV. Something very exciting."

"My powers are in check. Tell me."

"It's really kind of exciting. And a fabulous idea. Bobby and these other men are going to make a series of movies for TV—stories, separate stories, but all about the same girl. A model who comes to New York and her various adventures. Romance, et cetera. She's a model, so they can work in masses of clothes and glamour to dress the show, and they can have pretty interesting stories. I think it's a fabulous idea."

"Not bad at all."

"Well, the big news is that Bobby thinks there's a chance I might get the girl. He thinks I'm just right and I've been a

model and I've done TV and so on. Now I have to meet the director and the backers. Nick, I hope you don't mind. I made a dinner date. For tomorrow night."

"Are they all coming to our place?"

"No; they're all going out to the director's house in the Valley, and Bobby asked me to come along. The point is, he didn't invite you—and I thought—well, at this point, it might be silly——"

"Of course." He thought at once of Del. A free evening and Del.

"You sure you don't mind?"

"Don't be silly. I'll drop in somewhere downtown." He thought he had better add, "That really does sound swell. I hope it comes to something for you."

Lazily she crossed her long rustling legs—extraordinarily long legs for a girl who wasn't tall. "Thanks. Really kind of exciting, I must admit. I'd sort of made up my mind to not working when we left New York and I had to give up all my contacts. But that's the way these things happen."

"I just didn't know you were interested in getting back into it."

"Well, did you expect me to sit around moping? I've got the apartment all decorated, and outside of fooling around with my Leica, what else is there?"

"All I said was, I just didn't know."

"Well, you certainly don't object, do you?"

"No. As you so neatly put it, I certainly don't object." An idea crossed him: not an idea, a pang of something that might have been hope. "Matter of fact, I'm wishing very hard for you."

She looked at him, then she said, "Honestly, Nick. Sometimes I think you're mad. You can be so nice when you want to be. But lately you're always sort of nibbling at things. You just won't leave matters alone."

"I wasn't nibbling. I was just being funny, I told you."

"Well, that sort of funny is nibbling."

"O.K., O.K.," he said irritably.

In a moment she touched his hand. "Old beetlebrows," she said silkily.

It was the moment of reconciliation. He had always enjoyed it, like sailing back into port after a frisky run before the wind. Now there was little pleasure in it.

They had an apartment in a smart nest of houses on a hill above the Strip overlooking Hollywood. He turned the car into the thick-timbered shed that served as the garage for the houses, and she said she was hungry. "I was talking so much to that man, I didn't have a chance to eat. Besides tonight of all nights, they would have *spareribs*.^{*} I didn't want to sit there with my mouth open, gnawing like an ape."

"How about some eggs?"

"Would you make one of your omelettes? They're always wonderful."

"How about *en matelote*?" The job of cooking, skilful and pleasant, would give him a chance to be attentive to her without personal involvement.

"Even better. You are sweet."

He had a couple of *bouquets garnis* ready, so the whole thing took him only about twenty minutes to prepare. He worked quickly, surely, cleanly. He enjoyed cooking. He enjoyed a lot of things.

Iris perched on the kitchen stool and watched him, her slender face almost tilted backward, her arms folded with the tapering fingers touching her shoulders as if they belonged to a stranger. She looked like a princess, he thought, slumming below stairs. Not the young, dewy princess idolized by her father and her people. Her older sister, icily beautiful, about whom there were strange whisperings and who might never marry.

But she had married, he thought; and marrying, moved further away. How clear that had become in the light of the last few months. How uncomfortably clear.

Del was waiting on the bench for bus patrons, her coat collar around her face. When he stopped at the corner, she

jumped up, hurried into the car and slammed the door before he could say "Hello."

"Take it easy," he said, half smiling. "We're not making a getaway."

"I'm sorry. Hello, Nick."

"That's better. Sit back. Inhale. If you get worried, there's a false beard in the glove compartment."

She nodded as if she were noting his advice soberly.

"How's your mother?" he asked.

"Fine. She hopes I have a good time at the movies tonight with Carolyn."

"Ah, well. Mothers. They worry. Hot or cold, they worry. I'm not being flip; it's true."

"Yes. My mother does, anyway."

He had met her mother twice. Once he had called to take Del to a concert and once had brought her home after a Press party. She was blue-haired, wore rimless glasses, and lived in a small hygienic house in Westwood. She was quite cordial, but very observant; Nick had sensed that the air was full of inquiry. Del's sister had married a Navy man and now there was trouble there. Mrs. Vanderhoff would have been *en garde* with a married man in Del's vicinity in any event; the sister's recent troubles had heightened her apprehensions.

"Does your mother dislike me?"

"No. Absolutely not. She just likes me more."

He smiled. "She didn't say that. You did."

"That's right."

"And you wonder why I——" He broke off. "You're not very much like your mother, you know."

"She's done a lot for me. She's absolutely inside my bones. There's no point in my trying to judge her."

"I'm not asking you to. I'm just saying that you're another example of something that puzzles me. How certain people can possibly come out of certain homes. I don't mean anything against your mother, necessarily. But it *is* puzzling."

She concurred thoroughly although she said only "Uh-huh."

She said then, "It's not that I always agree with her. Or that I just want to go on—well, it's not all so hotsy-totsy living with her, as much as I love her. It's complicated."

"Do you know something?" He said solemnly, "That's life."

"Kindly drop dead," she said with a shrug.

The restaurant outside Santa Monica was done up with fish nets and candles and portholes, but it was small and quiet and the food was good. They had bouillabaisse and a bottle of Pouilly-Fuissé.

"Brother Wank likes the new designs," he said as he picked at a mussel.

"Why shouldn't he? They're dreamy. You're probably the dreamiest designer there is."

"Even with the strips?"

"Y-you can even make those strips look dreamy."

"Well, Mother always said to me, 'My boy, if you can't be good, be dreamy.'"

"Nick, what did your mother actually call you? Did she call you Nick? No," she said quickly; "don't tell me, I don't want to know."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to know any more about you. I don't want to—to . . ." She halted.

He said quietly, his eyes fixed on her. "Until I was about four, she called me Blesséd. Honestly. I feel you should know that. It's only fair. After that, it was, and is, Marion."

She poked around in her plate with her fork.

"You're not eating a thing," he said. "Do you realize that?"

She continued to poke, without looking at him.

He said, "Wank is also beginning to talk about my contract." She nodded and said nothing. "Don't you want to hear what he said?"

She was still intent on her plate.

He said. "God damn it." He reached over and grasped her wrist. "You're crazy about me, aren't you? Aren't you?"

"Yes," she said.

"And you know I'm crazy about you."

"I don't know. If you say so."

"If I say so. Here I am with nice hot harpoons sticking through me, all because of you. I don't know whether I'm on my head or my feet, and all you can say is——"

He put his hand on the back of her neck, and pulled her toward him across the narrow table. He kissed her. She didn't protest and in a second she returned his kiss. Then she broke away.

"Yes, sir," she said, "free floor show with the blue-plate dinner. They'll pay us to come back here."

"No one can see us in this nook. That's why I picked it."

"You're a real accomplished sneak. I mean, nothing amateur about you."

"I suppose I've got lipstick all over me."

"Plenty. You look peachy."

He rubbed his mouth with his napkin. "All right?"

"Well, better."

He rubbed again, then crumpled the napkin. "I think Wank wants to renew."

"Of course he does. You're a whiz. You're practically the best designer I ever heard of. Whatever he pays you, it's worth it."

"He'd have to pay me more."

"Swell."

"And in spite of it all, I still don't know whether I'm coming or going. All because of you. So, naturally, you don't even ask me what I'm going to do."

"W-well, how can I? I—I'm no part of your life."

"Del, for God's sake, things are tough enough——"

"W-well, am I?" she asked fiercely. "How can I ever care? You've got Iris, that lovely thing. You've got a million happy little commitments tying you down. Where do I figure in all this?"

"Del, Del——"

"*You've* got a problem, *you've* got harpoons. I—I can't eat or sleep, my mother doesn't even ask me any more what the trouble is; it's written all over me, I'm so silly about you. But," she said, "I've made up my mind."

He frowned. "What? What do you mean?"

"I can't stand it any more like this. I can't live like this, seeing you in the office all day and sneaking in a few nice hot kisses in the car and then making sure to wipe off the lipstick and all the time knowing it's all going nowhere at all. Just nowhere. I'm clearing out. I'm quitting."

"Listen, Del. . . ."

She raised her hands quickly, nervously. "I am, Nick. I can't compete with Iris, that doll, that chromium-plated doll. She's too slick, she's beautiful. I'm not. Every time I just think of her, I get the twitches. Look at my hands." She held them out. "Go on, just look at them."

"They're shaking a little. So what?"

"I don't mean that, I mean look at them. Short, square, stubby fingers. Like a prize Mongolian idiot. You ever look at her hands? They're like—like swans. And I'm supposed to compete with her and sit around and watch you and know that she's there and that she's got you all tied up so that you don't know what you want——"

"I damned well do know. But there are problems,"

"Well, bud, that's life. As a philosopher told me recently. We've all got them, and mine are driving me a teeny bit too hysterical."

"Do you think if you quit the job, that's going to be the end of it? Do you think I'm just going to leave you alone?"

"Nick," she said, "I don't mean just quit. I'm going away."

He paused. He suddenly felt as if he were on a theatrical turntable that was slowly beginning to move, taking him out of one period of his life into another context. He wasn't sure he liked this feeling. "Where? Where are you going?"

"I don't know. New York, maybe. Myrna's written and invited me. I've been living at home too long anyway. That's

why I'm such a silly fool, don't even know how to take care of myself."

He stared at her. He had fine but very black brows and when he stared he seemed to scowl. He said, "Let's not talk for a little while. I want to take that in. I guess I have to think."

"O.K.," she said meekly.

Of course he had known in the front of his mind, the part that told him when to shave or stop for a red light, the part that really didn't matter, that the situation between them could not go on indefinitely. He knew that he was in love with Del and not with his wife. He knew that the only times he felt fully conscious were when he was working or when he was with Del and that to see her alone like this he had to hope for a sly opportunity and her reluctant contrivance. There wasn't even a pretence at permanence in this arrangement. But something deeper in him, massive, powerful, but not thoughtful, slow to move, had been reluctant to face the decision that had to come.

He supposed it was because in his three years of marriage he had come to place the greatest value on comfort, not all of it trivial by any means. Now he was threatened with drastic uprootings. As much as he wanted this girl, and though he knew he didn't want to live without her, he had a kind of unreasoning resistance to change: to the trouble entailed.

"New York," he said. He couldn't leave her far out there away from him, stranded with her *bouillabaisse*. He had to talk about something while his brain lined up factors and considerations. "Did I ever tell you why I left New York?"

"Wank offered you the job here. Isn't that why?"

"Well, yes, that was the direct cause. But there was a reason why I happened to be free. I don't talk about it much. No one likes to brag about a situation in which he looks like a dope."

"You didn't do anything dopey. Someone played a dirty trick on you."

He smiled. "How do you know that?"

"I know about you."

In a moment he said, "Well, about six years ago another

designer and I opened an office together, fellow named Ferdy Bates. We'd both been working in a big firm, industrial design. We thought that our boss was a stupid businessman, so we branched out on our own, and in a couple of years we built up a very nice list of accounts, all sorts of businesses. But about sixty per cent. of our billings came from one company—Peerless Food^c. We did their packaging—they even gave us their point-of-sales materials and a lot of their graphics problems. Then about a year and a half ago Ferdy came to me and said he felt cramped, he wanted to open an office by himself. So we dissolved our partnership. And then I found out he had a contract for all Peerless's business. He left and he took them with him."

"Th-that's really charming. Oh, lovely. Did you murder him?"

"Couldn't do a thing. They had a right to place their business where they liked. And I found out later he'd convinced them that all the good ideas, the ones that made money for them, came from him." He smiled again. "Which wasn't precisely true."

"The fools. Couldn't they see just by talking to you——?" she said angrily.

"Sshh. Don't let your patriotism obscure the facts. Ferdy was the salesman on our team. He saw them much more than I did and he has quite a line of talk. He sold them, that's all."

"But haven't they found out *since*?"

"I haven't heard a thing."

"Well, what happened to your own office? Didn't you keep going?"

"Not for long. With what was left, there wasn't much chance to make any real money. Besides, a lot of the others drifted away. Businessmen—vice-presidents in charge of manufacturing and sales, anyway—are a bunch of sheep. They travel in mobs. If a big one leaves, the others leave, too."

"What did you do?"

"I took a vacation. I thought it was all too typical for words, and I closed down. I'd been working hard for about

four years and I took five months off. We floated around Europe for a while. When we got back, I thought about opening the office again, but then I met Wank. That seemed more sensible than bucking it alone. I took his offer."

"I suppose it *was* more sensible."

"And what does that little emphasis mean?"

"Oh, j-just that you're so much better than what you've been doing here. Those early things of yours were so—so—I don't know—wonderful."

"Ach."

"Honest, th-there's nothing you couldn't do. I just wish——" She broke off. "I'm sorry."

"Well, at worst it's the ill wind department. If it weren't for Wank—and for Ferdy—we'd never have met." Her mouth tensed. "We'd never have met," he repeated. "You realize," he said, "the only reason I've gone into all this right now is just to keep talking. It's true enough, but I haven't been listening to it. I just wanted to keep saying something."

"All right. Thanks. Really. But you didn't have to."

"Del," he said carefully, "you know it's true. That I love you."

She raised a hand and began to stammer. "L-look, don't make me any trouble. Please. I—I told you what I had to tell you and you don't have to say a thing. Not a thing. I don't want you to say anything. I just wanted to tell you."

"All right, you told me. Now for Christ's sake shut up and let me tell *you* something." She shivered slightly, almost happily. He stroked the stem of the wineglass. "How well do you know me, Del? Do you know me at all?"

"It's funny. I know everything and absolutely nothing."

"Yes. Well—um—I'm not as marvellous as I probably appear to the world. There are things about me I'm not particularly proud of, but they're there."

"O.K. All right. So what?"

"All I'm building up to is, if I don't say right away that I'm going to leave Iris tonight and go with you or keep you

here or whatever, that hasn't a thing to do with the fact that I love you."

"All right. I told you you didn't have to say anything. I didn't give you the big news just to make you say something."

Instead of making an angry retort, he said, quite quietly, "I know you didn't. I know we both know we love each other. I know we both want to work things out. That's true, isn't it?"

"I guess so," she whispered.

"You say you're going away. I hope you don't. But if you do—well, you won't be surprised if I turn up. Even in New York."

"Nick, you don't understand, either. I love you, too, darling, darling, but I'm not sure I want you to turn up. I'm not sure I can handle the responsibility. You'd be giving up your job, your wife, an awful lot. I'm not sure I want it all on me."

"Things could work out very well. They really could."

"Sure they could. Also not. You don't know me either. Little Butterfingers. I'm not sure I'm right for the part—the other woman who brings him peace and fulfilment. I—I don't have the vaguest idea whether I could do that. You're so—so experienced and smart, I'm such a jerk. I'm almost as scared of you as I am of Iris." She clasped his hand hotly. "Although I'd die for you. You know that."

They held hands for a minute.

Then he said. "All right. I don't want you to leave. But if you do, if you feel you have to, then, if you'll pardon the expression, love will find a way."

"It very often doesn't."

"We'll see. Let's just see, hah, Del?"

She brought his hand to her face and pressed it against her cheek. Then she kissed it quickly, embarrassedly, and relinquished it.

He heard the waiter coming and it roused him from a kind of trance. "This food is ice-cold. Useless."

"I don't care," she said. "I'm not hungry. Let's just have several cups of coffee."

[3]

SHE deceived him by one day about the date of her departure so he never got a chance to say goodbye to her. That was what brought matters to a head. The morning after their dinner in Santa Monica she gave ten days' notice at the office, and he spent those ten days in a peculiar state of suspension. He had once gone to a cocktail party at which the hosts' four-year-old daughter had been asked to pass a large tray of *canapés*. At one point the child had allowed the tray to tilt in her hands and had stood there staring fascinatedly as the *canapés* slid slowly off the tray on to the floor, watching soberly until the last one had fallen. Nick felt that way during those ten days, as he watched the calendar turn inexorably, as he made no effort to alter the situation.

There was a kind of strong, buried caution in him that kept him from reaching a decision, an internal elder brother, quite independent of his ache for her. He recognized this other feeling as an instinct of self-preservation; and he knew that it was exactly this instinct in herself that was making her leave. He knew she had told him a terrible truth that night: she didn't know whether she could bear the responsibility of his altering his life for her. And now he was forced to examine himself: he didn't know (aside from the fact that the breath of her presence seemed the breath in his body) whether he wanted to get involved with a girl who was so unsettled, who would be in so many intense ways so completely demanding. One could be married to Iris and say goodbye in the morning and

hello at night and know she was there as one's house or car was there. That suited Iris as much as it suited him. Not so with Del. Living with Del would be a twenty-four-hour matter, and quite unpredictable. The cooler side of him didn't know whether he could handle the job or what shape it would take: and so held back. It was the acme of high romance, he knew, to give all for love, even if it burned out in a month. But the twentieth century had not been constructed to accommodate romance; these were the days in which love was supposed to lead somewhere. And he was not sure that the pursuit of their love would lead to anything but misery for both of them.

It was not cold selfishness. It was not ego. It certainly was not want of love. ("Whatever that little word means," as Del was fond of saying.) It was simply the ability to think ahead. What's the point of being intelligent, he thought, if you use your intelligence everywhere except in matters of love? I've already made one mistake.

Del and he were calm and tender with each other during those last ten days that they were alone together in the office. When Wank asked him to modify some cutlery designs because they were "a little extreme shape-wise," Del simply helped him to alter the plans and memos without comment, as if her view of him as a constrained seer would merely be intrusive in the face of the great cold parting. She even let him drive her to her corner one evening after they had worked late. She was to take an eight o'clock plane on Friday night. She had said that her mother didn't want to go to the airport ("Mother's upset enough and she hates to go to pieces in public"). Nick could drive her out there if he liked. Friday morning when he came in, she was not at her desk. On his desk he found a sealed envelope addressed to him in her own studious scrawl. He opened it without premonition.

Dearest,—(And as I write that word I know it's so absolutely true) I'll probably be in New York by the time

you read this. I lied to you about the day I was leaving. Nick darling, I just couldn't stand saying goodbye to you. Not only because it's a special kind of hell that neither of us really deserves, but because the actual *fact* of it—really saying goodbye with a real aeroplane waiting—might make it seem too stupid for two people who love each other to part deliberately. As long as we're not actually there *together*, I'll still believe that I must do it. (You see, I don't say it's necessarily the right thing to do, I just say I must do it.)

So don't be angry at me, Nick. I've never been so miserable and so grateful in my life.

I wish I could say don't write to me and don't come after me.

D.

PS.—Will you make out my last cheque to mother—Bertha Vanderhoff—and send it to her? Thanks.

PPS. Nick—Nick—— Oh, I can't say it. You know, anyway. I just didn't want to end with that sentimental touch about the cheque.

He hardly knew what most of the note said (until he began the first of his many re-readings). By the time his eyes took in the first few sentences he felt as if a trap-door had opened and all his caution and thoughtfulness and weighing and balancing had plummeted through; and he was left dangling, strangling in loneliness and love. Of *course* he had known she would leave; of *course* he had known he would miss her; but somehow the sudden plunge into this desolate position, even if only twenty-four hours sooner, made it seem overwhelmingly worse. It was like being thrown backward into a freezing pool, instead of living. All the analysis and consideration of the last ten days seemed the utterest folly; all he wanted now was Del. The reflections he had carefully rounded, the points he had mulled in the last ten days were all probably true; but now in the ghastly black of her absence, they didn't matter. He didn't want reflection now; he wanted Del.

He acted before he had time to reflect again. He stuffed the letter in his pocket and went upstairs to see Wank.

"Hiya, feller," called Wank from behind the L-shaped desk that Nick had designed for him.

"Marvin," he said at once. "I've come to a decision about the contract. I'm bursting in on you like this because I wanted to give it to you straight, as soon as possible."

"Make yourself at home, boy," said Wank with a slightly uneasy smile. "We can break out the champagne even if it is ten a.m."

"I'm afraid it's bad news," said Nick. "I'm not renewing."

Then there followed a half-hour of blurred talk, of which Nick was not entirely conscious. It began with Wank's feelers as to whether Nick wanted an even larger increase or whether he had another offer; an entreaty to him to reconsider; and then a blunt request for the honest reason. Nick hadn't taken time to think of an excuse to give Wank and now he had to improvise one on the spot; the best he could think of was that he felt he had nearly exhausted his ideas for the time being in the field of kitchenware and household utensils, that he had to get into another field that would give him the stimulation he needed right now, to tap areas of his thinking that hadn't been mined so heavily in the past year. If he stayed in this job, he would only begin to repeat himself. Maybe in a few years he'd be ready again.

Wank asked him to take a vacation—three weeks, a month. To take a leave of absence for three months. But the longer they talked, the less attention Nick found himself paying; his thoughts were beginning to funnel toward Iris. This decision with Wank entailed a showdown with her. He was ready for it. Anxious.

And since that was what he was thinking of while Wank continued to purr, he thought the best thing to do was to cut short this conversation. He didn't want to offend Wank—who had been generous to him in his own self-seeking way—by seeming vacant and aloof while he listened.

He got up. "There's a great deal in what you say, Marvin. But you know how these things are, you're a man of experience. A fellow has to make his own decisions, right or wrong. I'll tie everything up in the next three weeks and then I'm afraid that's that. Thanks, anyway. Sincerely."

He went downstairs, thinking: Del, be there. Be at your desk. Jump like a deer when I come up quietly to you across the carpet. Make some stinging remark because you think I ought to be doing more high-flown work. Say some stupid, heart-breaking thing. But *be* there: with your pale cheeks and your round brown eyes and your Mongolian idiot hands.

He walked across the empty ante-room to his office. He fiddled at his desk for an hour, trying to read mail and check blueprints, thinking of what he would say to Iris. Then just before lunch she phoned him.

"Nick, what is all this? Marvin just called to say how sorry he is that you're not staying. What in the world is going on?"

Clever old Marvin. Wily Wank.

"I'll be right home," he said.

As he drove through the car-crowded streets, he thought less of what was ahead of him than of what was behind; what had brought him to this predicament in his life. A sentence remembered from his childhood suddenly soared into his mind. He was sitting with his mother on the immense, flowery sofa in the house on the Cape and she was reading him a story about the First War; a terrible catastrophe, caused by the Germans, had been reported to the Kaiser, and Wilhelm had said, "*Ich habe es nicht gewollt.*"

Well, Nick had not willed this situation. He had tried to shape his life to afford himself a maximum of satisfaction with a minimum of aggressiveness and disruption. He wanted only to be active and occupied, to pay his way without obligation to anyone; and to have a private life that pleased his sense of aesthetics. He had approached love as he had approached his

work. His overriding maxim was: "Be reasonable." How had he got into this pickle? And what, he thought with a small smile, would his mother say?

She had had her own plans for him. She had allowed him to study drawing and design, since it was possible to do this at Harvard, but she had envisaged him as somehow spending his life doing harmless watercolours and the family's Christmas cards. When he arrived at the Cape Cod place the June of his graduation and said that he could stay only for the week-end because he had appointments in New York about a job, she had said, "But, Marion dearest, you can't go now. The water is at its best."

He had loved his mother for saying that. It was so thoroughly her own remark, so much a part of her own view of his best interests that it made him feel quite affectionate. "I'm sorry, Mother," he had said, smiling. "I've got a way to make. I must go down on Monday."

"Dearest, your energy, I adore it, but couldn't you do your drawings and designs just as well up here? So many painters do."

"I'm not a painter, Mother. I'm—something else. I have to work *with* people."

"Then there's Angela. Lyon's niece. She's coming next week and I had hoped you would be here to help entertain her."

Lyon was his English stepfather; and Nick had met Angela once in London. Suddenly his appointments in New York had seemed twice as interesting and important.

"That's a pity," he had said. "But."

"Dearest," she had said after a moment, her clear, imperial eyes troubled, "have I done anything? Is there some reason that you're angry with me?"

"Not in the slightest, Mother. Not at all." He had taken her hand. "You absolutely mustn't think that. That's not why I wouldn't take that huge graduation cheque or why I want to get a job. The reason is simply that I'm not you. I'm not

anyone else but me. It's as plain and stupid as that. And I want to be me."

He couldn't have told her that he had become increasingly and somehow appallingly conscious of the fact that in his whole life he had never known socially anyone who worked for a living. He couldn't describe, without disturbing her and inviting the very ministrations he hoped to avoid, his growing sense that he was kicking around in mid-air, that he had never touched earth.

All I wanted, he thought now, was to be another fellow behaving the way most people behave. I didn't want to get into extraordinary circumstances. I just wanted to work reasonably hard, live reasonably pleasantly, and die relatively painlessly. That was too much to ask, it seems. Here I am with things nicely twisted. What has brought me to this unpretty pass?

He wasn't given to introspection, so it was difficult for him to isolate the causes. The closest he could come to it was that he had tried to impose a preconceived pattern on his life; and reality, like Oliver Edwards' cheerfulness, had broken in.

When he opened the apartment door, Iris, in her black toreador pants, was sitting in the chair by the picture window, one velvet leg draped over the arm. For the moment the sight of her, calm and indolent as ever, made him feel that he had imagined the events of the morning, the past months; that nothing had changed. For a moment too, he could find in himself the wish that this were true. Then, almost purposefully, he thought of Del.

"Hi," he said. "Thanks for waiting for me."

"I wasn't going anywhere. Nick," she said, "I have an instinct. Is his going to be a scene?"

"No," he replied, reminding himself that Iris was no fool, "but it is going to be a decision. I suppose it's something I should have talked over with you beforehand. However, I didn't. It's been building up inside me, and today it suddenly came out, that's all."

"Oh, well, you never were much on little confidences. But then neither am I, I suppose. Well, there must be a reason for what you did. Why don't you want to stay with Marvin? Do you have something else that's better?"

Now he faced something odd with her. If he told her the real reason, he would have committed himself more firmly about Del to Iris than to Del herself.

"I'm fed to the teeth with pots and pans and ice-crushers and dandy new ideas for lazy Susans. I've scraped the bottom of the barrel in that department. I want to get on, into something else. I'd like to get back into graphics, into furniture, into a hundred other things. The job's too narrow."

"Sure, baby," she said blandly. "If you say so. Although the lucre was nice and filthy. But I suppose there are plenty of other people who would love to have you. Maybe there's even something in the picture studios."

He shook his head. "I'm fed up with Hollywood, too. And its suburbs. I don't live here. Not really. This isn't where I belong. I'm going back to New York. And," he added, knowing exactly what he said as he said it, "I thought you'd like to get back to New York yourself."

He had thought: If I can get her to come back to New York with me, then I can be near Del again without overwhelming her, can see her without burdening her with responsibility.

"No, baby," said Iris.

And if Iris won't come, he had thought, because of that Bobby Schlossman thing or for any other reason, then the decision will have been hers and my secret will still be mine.

"Bobby called this morning," said Iris. "It's all practically set. As good as signed. They've made appointments for me with a dress-designer."

"Oh. Well, that's fine. Congratulations. I hope the show runs a hundred years. But, Iris——"

"Yes?"

"I haven't told you the whole truth." The first lie. "I've

been in touch with some of my old pals in New York. They're warming some things up for me. I'd promised them I'd be back in a month. I'm committed. Besides, Iris, I just don't want to live here."

She lifted her blue eyes from her cigarette-holder and put her glance squarely on him. In that calm look the last of their marriage disappeared. There would be more words, Nick knew, days, weeks, months might have to unravel; but the end of the marriage dated from that look.

"Well, Nick," she said quietly, "I suppose that's that."

"I'll go back," he said, "and you stay here. For a while." He felt like a fencer following through a phrase just for the sake of formal completeness. "We'll see how things work out. Maybe something will happen to the show. Maybe I'll find that I don't like it back there as much as I thought. We'll see, shall we?"

"All right. We'll see." She smiled sadly. It was the first sign of compassion he had seen on her face in some time. "At least you kept your promise. You said there would be no scene."

Isn't it terrible that a marriage can end this way? He thought. The stars should be shrieking. We're human beings; and a marriage is ending. It's right that it should end; but doesn't the universe understand how important the occasion is? We're two *people*.

He remembered the best of Iris and his eyes grew a little moist. "Stiff upper lip," he said. "Anyone for tennis?"

But during their last three weeks the mood of gentle rue between them quickly dissolved in an acid that Iris developed. He still didn't know whether she suspected anything about Del; he had hardly mentioned Del since he hired her, and had said recently only that his secretary had left. It simply became clear to Iris that, no matter how calmly and rationally matters were discussed or how sensibly plans were made or what career reasons were advanced, the underlying fact was that he was leaving her; and, Nick recognized, there is no way to do

that flatteringly. They both knew that a marriage could not survive with a centrepiece of three thousand miles. She had a viable reason to stay and felt that his leaving was so much a matter of whim that he would have overcome it if he wanted her. (All true enough, he admitted secretly.) Indeed, as time went on, he could see irritation in her because he had made the first move: as if they had both known they could just as easily part as stay together and she was angry at herself for letting him initiate the breach. She was not hurt at losing him but at being left.

She began to refer to him as Our Wandering Boy; she frequently dined out without him and came home late. Within a few days he had given up his twin bed to sleep on the sofa in the living-room. He never announced an intention to do this and she never commented on it; and Nick understood why the estrangement increased so easily between them. They were merely acknowledging overtly a state that had existed for some time. *De facto* had become, so to speak, *de jure*. This made him doubly glad of his decision and impatient.

He found a Manhattan telephone book and looked up the address of Myrna Salkow, the college friend with whom Del was staying. He wrote to Del and told her that he was not renewing his contract with Wank, that he had decided to return to New York. He said, in order not to frighten her, that he might well have reached that decision anyway, but that he missed her terribly. He wrote in a merely friendly tone, but he couldn't help adding a postscript. "I've tried to send this letter without mentioning that I know now, more clearly than ever, that I love you. But I can't leave it out."

She replied in a week. She wrote in pencil on a page torn from a stenographic notebook. She had got a job as a secretary with a magazine publisher. She loved New York, although it was something like a circus; there was too much going on, she hadn't yet learned how to watch it. She hoped he was well. She used no closing on the letter, affectionate or otherwise. But she did sign herself "Del."

He sensed that this was Draft Number Fifteen or so: that she had tried a number of different ways to reply and finally had sorted and sieved out one letter that was cordial but non-committal. It was exactly what he had expected and he found it greatly encouraging.

He wrote to a New York real estate agent he knew and asked whether there was a small furnished apartment he could sublet. The agent replied that a painter who had one of the firm's apartments on Charles Street was going to Haiti for a year; Nick wired at once saying that he would take the place unseen at the rent quoted.

Iris heard him telephone the wire to Western Union and when he hung up, she said, "The only thing that surprises me is that you're bothering. All you'll be changing is your address."

"What does that mean?"

She flicked a page of her magazine. "If I cared enough, I'd ask you why you're doing all this. It can't really be because you're restless. It's your religion not to be restless."

"I've told you why——"

"Please," she said with a patient smile. "I don't honestly care. But I know it can't actually be your work. All you've ever wanted is just to be busy."

He didn't argue because he didn't want by inadvertence to reveal anything, so he let her consider that she saw him more clearly than he saw himself. However her remark made him wonder seriously for the first time about his work in New York. Until then all his professional thoughts had been about leaving Wank. But he had no worries. He knew he was good at his job. He didn't think he had the heaven-storming destiny that Del thought he was not quite fulfilling; still, he had an infinite faith in his ability to be stimulated successfully by any challenge; and he knew that many people in New York remembered him. There would be no immediate problem about money; he had made and saved considerably with Ferdy Bates and had even saved some out here. Iris had her job and

would have no pressures, at least for a time. He had a few months' breathing space in which to try various postures of work and to decide whether he would be more comfortable in an office of his own or on a good staff.

He thought of Ferdy Bates, which he rarely did these days. When the Bates thing had happened, the first emotion he had felt was a kind of amused impotence: as if that was the way people behaved and it had only been a question of time before someone did it to him, and what could he do about it, change human nature? During the last year and a half his occasional thoughts of Ferdy had been largely constituted of a dimly remembered contempt. Now that he realized he might be seeing Ferdy again, as he moved in his particular professional stratum in New York, he realized that he actively despised Ferdy; didn't want to see him; would snub him if they met. He smiled as he recognized another fact about himself: there was someone in New York who would give him a quite justified opportunity to feel morally superior, and that was a minor but true attraction in returning.

He dropped a note to his mother, who was currently in England; she and her husband spent about six months of the year there. He simply said that he had grown tired of Hollywood and was returning to New York. Iris had got a very good television job and was staying for a while. His mother would leap to understand completely that he couldn't stand this place and would scent nothing wrong in his leaving alone. Marriage had always been to her a matter of individual, not mutual, convenience.

As the day of his departure approached, he had an image of himself as a rocket being groomed for a test launching. No one quite knows what the result will be; everyone knows it has to be done. He found that he had no fixed expectations in him; but he did feel a great swell of possibility in many ways. Del, Del was in his dreams and daydreams (that warm voice, the mouth that made a little "o" while she listened to you), and he knew he had to put himself within the circle of the fire.

He had no formulated plans toward her, any more than she had toward him; but he knew he had to be near her so that something could happen if it would. For the first time in his personal life, a quick nerve had been touched. It was not an entirely pleasant feeling; but it was one he wanted more of.

He and Iris never mentioned divorce; he supposed they could drift toward that as they had drifted into and out of a marital relationship. On the morning of the day he left, she telephoned home from the studio to ask whether he had paid the garage for the grease job; he said he had and would leave the receipted bill on her dresser. Those were the last words they spoke to each other. Then he took a taxi to the airport feeling like an event in the womb of time.

Part Two

The occasion and the experience, then, are nothing. It all depends on the capacity of the soul to be grasped, to have its life-currents absorbed by what is given.

WILLIAM JAMES.

[I]

IT was October in New York, a fact Nick had not observed in Hollywood, where it was of small importance. During his first few days back in Manhattan he found himself in a paradox: reaching familiarly for door-knobs in favourite restaurants and turning automatically in well-known corridors toward the elevators, yet at the same time freshly aware of, almost rediscovering, the impact of autumn and the high echoes of the tremendous towers.

He telephoned Del at her office the afternoon of the day he arrived.

"Del, it's me."

"Well, Nick," she said. "How are you?" There was a little curl in her voice as if Cousin Nick had come in unexpectedly from Iowa for the holidays and she was so pleased.

He decided to let this pass without comment, principally because he didn't know her environment at the other end of the line.

"I'm fine, as it happens. How are you?"

"Just fine."

"Good. I haven't another thing to say, except that I'd like to see you tonight."

"Oh, gee, Nick, I can't tonight. I have a date."

This possibility had not occurred to him. He had thought of himself as coming to her and of her as there for him to come to. Her reply re-established context.

"Oh. Too bad. Well, I hope you're not busy tomorrow night."

"I—I guess not."

"Will you have dinner with me?"

"If you like."

He paused. "Del."

"Yes?"

"Well, never mind. I'll see you tomorrow. Where shall I meet you and when?"

"Why don't you come to the apartment? About six-thirty."

"Why don't I? I'll see you then."

The professional problem that faced Nick at the moment was how to let it be known that he was back in New York. He could not send out engraved cards announcing that he was considering what to do with his career and would welcome any offers: nor could he, like actors in old-time theatrical journals, advertise that he was at liberty. But there were grapevines in the design world as in all the other complex but completely disparate strata of New York. The best thing was to put the news in circulation discreetly and see what developed. The day after his arrival he called George LoPresto, a design journal editor whom he knew, and invited him to lunch. George was free and they met in one of the plush East Fifties restaurants.

"Practically, the last place in New York where you can get decent service," said George and snapped his fingers for the waiter. "Now that the old Ritz is gone."

"Come to Hollywood, George. A telephone under every casserole cover."

George was a short, sharp-nosed, squeaky-voiced man with active eyes. He was easily offended and easily flattered, like most egotists. After the second drink, he lighted his fourth cigarette.

"Tell me, boy, are you back in town for keeps?"

"I think so. I'm not sure, but it's pretty likely. I've had enough experience of other cities now to know that this is

where I want to live. Oh, if someone offered me a dream job in New Orleans or San Francisco, I might be induced to go there, but by choice—New York.”

“Uh-huh. Say, I thought the work you did for Wank out there was damned interesting. Matter of fact, I had a note in my follow-up file to get an article from you on kitchenware.”

“Any time. And since we’re on the subject, the pictures you ran last winter of my metal and wood series helped me a lot with Wank and the salesmen. I want to thank you again.”

“News is news,” said George, “and good design is our news. But what’s it going to be with you now?”

“Not sure yet. I think I’ll just feel around.”

“I guess you won’t be opening an office of your own.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I understood you don’t like free-lancing. Ferdy Bates told me that’s why you got out of your old partnership with him.”

Nick stared for a moment. Then he realized that Ferdy would have had to invent a story to explain the break-up. Ferdy had to live here, to meet people like George every day, and he not only had to preserve face but had to seem just slightly superior to his ex-partner. However, this was not the moment to set matters to rights; it would cloud a casual atmosphere Nick wanted to maintain.

“I may have felt that way once. Although we were doing pretty well. I don’t necessarily feel that way now. But I certainly wouldn’t be averse to a good staff job.”

Remotely and vaguely he felt that he probably ought to use this transcontinental remove as an opportunity to start afresh, to open his own office again and have greater control over design projects, perhaps even concentrate on originating things rather than accept commissions. But he dismissed any rigorous adherence to this idea as rank puritanism. He would do whatever seemed best at the time of choice, without previous commitment to himself.

“The right staff. At the right salary,” said George.

"Exactly. I'm in no rush. What I want is something that will really interest me. And really pay me for being interested."

"Look, suppose I run a note in next week's issue—the chatter column. I'll say I had lunch with you, that you're back from the Coast after a year of triumphs and you're taking a brief rest before announcing your plans."

"I'd appreciate that, George."

"Nothing, boy. You'll do me a favour some day."

"I'll sure try to."

"Incidentally Nick, why *did* you come back? I heard from someone on the Coast that Wank wanted to renew."

"He did. I just like it better here."

"That's the reason?"

Nick smiled. "Isn't that legal?"

George flushed slightly. "O.K., O.K. I don't want to snoop."

Nick refused to kow-tow. Besides, to conciliate would be to imply that there was indeed another reason. "But that's the whole point, George. You're not snooping. That is the reason. That and the fact I was tired of kitchen ware. Tell me," he said. "You know this place. What shall I have to eat?"

Later in the lunch, he asked, "By the way, how is Ferdy Bates doing?"

"All right, I hear. Nothing sensational."

"Still working for Peerless?"

"Yes; the contract hasn't run out yet. I've kept an eye on his stuff and it talks all right, but I couldn't say it sings. Frankly, Nick, and I don't want to knock Ferdy, I think it sang more when you were with him."

"Ah, I'll bet you say that to every unemployed bum."

George smiled and nodded. "I wish all my worries were as big as yours."

That afternoon George called him at home.

"Listen, boy. It's one of those things."

"What is, Georgie?"

"Fate. The hand of Destiny. Whatever you want to call it. A coincidence, anyway."

"What's up?"

"Do you know Harvey Benson over at Parlier's office?"

Guy Parlier was the best-known, if not the best, industrial designer in the country. Parlier Associates had the biggest billings in the profession and did some extraordinary, startling work.

"Benson? Yes, I think I've met him at lunches and meetings and so on. I couldn't claim to know him, though."

"Well, I've just heard that he's got a fat new job with General Motors. He's leaving Parlier."

"Oh?"

"Would his old job interest you? With Parlier?"

Parlier was one of the three or four names kids tossed around in design school, hating him for a meretrix of aspiring to his studio. But Nick wasn't excited: he felt that this possibility was simply one of the things that happened to you as you moved along, like getting grey hair or having to wear glasses.

"Well, let's put it this way. If Parlier wants to talk to me, I'm talkable-to."

"I'm going to call him to confirm the rumour. I can slip it in that I had lunch with you today. Do you know whether he knows your work?"

"Oh, sure. He was on a jury once that gave me a prize. A second prize, but still a prize."

"Swell, boy. I'll mention it. He gets the news from me before it appears in print."

"That's very nice of you, George."

"Nice my foot. He's an advertiser. He gets service. And if you go there, you son of a bitch, you'll tip me off first to all the news in the shop."

One of Parlier's much-advertised idiosyncrasies was his addiction to telegrams. At six o'clock, just as Nick was getting out of the shower, a wire arrived from Parlier. "Can you

lunch with me Chambord Thursday twelve-thirty." On his way over to Del's place, Nick stopped in a Western Union office and replied, "Thanks for invitation. Can make it."

Myrna Salkow's apartment was in West Thirteenth Street over an Italian restaurant. The entrance was jammed in between the restaurant and the next building, and Nick missed it the first time. He came back carefully, found it, and rang the bell. Salkow—Vanderhoff. When the buzzer sounded, he pushed open the door and was faced with a flight of stairs so long that they looked as if they had been transplanted from a futuristic German movie of the 'twenties.

He was about halfway up the flight of stairs, which seemed to be getting longer, when Del appeared on the landing. She was wearing a pink shirt with rolled-up sleeves and a button-down collar, and a dark skirt.

"Hi, Nick," she said. The moment he heard that funny, impulsive voice, he knew that if he had had any doubts about coming to New York, they would have been resolved at that sound.

"Hello, Del."

He reached the landing and she put out her hand. She grasped his hand firmly, it seemed to him, more to hold him off from kissing her than to welcome him.

"Well," he said, catching his breath, "you look the same."

"That's a hell of a thing to say. If you're going to insult me, you can just leave right now."

"The only way I can get back down those stairs is if you push me."

"Well, I guess you'd better come in first."

The apartment was one huge room—two rooms with the wall knocked out—with a kitchenette at one end and two big windows at the other. A tall girl with a large mouth and a pleasant smile, with short, close-curved blonde hair, rose from the sofa.

"Myrna," said Del, "this is Nick."

"Hello, Nick," she said almost eagerly as they shook hands. "It's so nice to meet you. I've heard so much about you. Really."

"That's enough, girl," said Del.

"Hello, Myrna," said Nick. "I've heard practically nothing about you." He wondered what she was thinking of him: whether he seemed to her merely a married man on the prowl or, if she had another estimate, what it was.

"We were just having some drinks," said Myrna. "Can't we make you one?"

"Love it. Scotch and water, if that's all right."

"Scotch?" said Del. "Are you mad, man? We're working girls. How will you have your gin?"

"Sorry. Lost my head," said Nick. "Do you have any bitters?"

"Yes," laughed Myrna, in a nice, breathy, toothful way. "As a matter of fact, a boy friend of mine gave me a bottle last Christmas. I've still got it. It's in the back of the cabinet, Del."

He noted, with a pride that in a silly way made him feel he had come to the right place, that Myrna had used the name he had invented. Evidently Del was calling herself just that. It was like finding a marker in a campsite to which he had returned.

"Gin, ice, dash of bitters."

"Righto, old boy," said Del. "Pip pip!" She turned to the kitchenette to make the drink.

"Have you found a place to live?" asked Myrna as they sat.

"Yes. I was lucky. I got an apartment here before I left the Coast."

"You are lucky. Are you all settled in?"

"Pretty much," Nick replied. "Some of my stuff is still coming by train. And the studio is something of a mess and I had to get permission to paint it. But I travelled fast and landed easy."

"Where is your place?"

"Charles Street, near Seventh. Come over soon and see it."

"I'd love to."

"How long have you lived in New York, Myrna?" he asked.

"Two years last month."

"What sort of work do you do?"

"I'm with V.B.S.—their TV programming department."

"That sounds pretty hot. Do you write scripts and so on?"

"Oh, God, no. I have no talent. Of any kind. I assist the man in charge of the budgets for the various programmes. It's interesting, but, don't get me wrong, I'm not creative."

"She merely happens to be the smartest person up there," said Del returning from the sink. "Just as she was the smartest person in college."

Myrna smiled at him. "On cold rainy nights we sit around and tell each other how wonderful we are. I thought Del was the smartest in college."

"The smartest who ever quit in her sophomore year," said Del. "Here's your drink."

"Thanks," said Nick and tasted it. "Fine. Thanks." He turned to Del. "And what is it exactly that you do, my girl?"

She shrugged. "Th-the usual stuff. Shoplifting, badger game, nothing very novel."

"Thank God you haven't changed. And what do you do daytimes?"

"What's the only thing I know? I'm a secretary."

"Yes, you told me. Tappan Publications. But whose secretary?"

"A woman named Lila Berger. She's terrific. She's the fiction editor of *Wife*, their ladies'-type magazine. She's crazy about mountain-climbing."

"And do you have to tag along taking notes?"

"Not so far. But with her I never know."

"She makes Del take vitamin pills," said Myrna.

"Have you been sick?" asked Nick.

"No," said Del, "she just decided I looked a little wan or something, so every day we take a pill together. She's terrific."

Myrna seemed to have waited until Nick had drunk precisely half of his gin. Then she rose. "Well, I've got a dinner date of my own."

"Loyal and faithful Gene?" asked Del.

"The Rock himself," said Myrna. After she had fixed her make-up and hair and put on her hat and coat, she said to Nick, "It was really very nice to meet you, Nick. Not like most let-downs after most build-ups."

"Shut up, Salkow," said Del pleasantly.

Nick said, "In spite of interruptions, I thank you, Myrna. And I hope we'll be seeing each other a lot."

After Myrna left he turned to Del, who was sitting on the edge of the sofa as if she expected him to pounce.

He put out his cigarette. "You're pretty nervous. Why are you so nervous? I thought you took vitamins. Why don't you relax?"

"This is a fine situation to relax in," she said. "I'd like to see even Bing Crosby relax in this situation."

"It's not a situation." Then he said, "Yes, I suppose it is. Let me just say something and then we'll go to dinner."

"All right."

"I'm here. I'm here because of you. You're here pretty much because of me. Let's just see each other and find out what happens."

"That little statement is supposed to relax me?"

"Well, at least it clears the air a bit. I'm simply trying not to come down on you like a load of bricks. I want us to be free but attached. I just want us both to spend some time being in love with each other." He added, "Which we are, aren't we?"

She picked at her skirt.

"Well?" he asked.

She looked at him, troubled. "I'm not sure any of this is any good. I'm not sure we're any good for each other. You still scare me; and I must scare you too or you'd be moving in faster." He wanted to reply but she said, "Well, wouldn't you?"

But you're here now, and as much as I regret it, I can't help being glad. So."

"So?"

"So I can't help the way I feel. You keep your hands at your side now," she said. She went over and took his chin in her hand and kissed him—a warm, enveloping kiss. He let her go back and sit down, but he felt as excited as if it were the first time he had ever kissed a girl.

In a moment he said, "Want to go to dinner?"

"There's one other thing," she said. "I'm going to go out with other men. I was out with a boy last night. And you—there are no strings on you either."

"All right. We'll make our way toward each other. I suppose we'll both never really be sure unless we try things along the way. Now go get your coat. I'm hungry."

While she was getting ready, he was overcome by what struck him as a sense of environment in the century. Living and love in life get more complicated every decade, he thought. Every scientist and artist and thinker and politician adding more and more complexity to our total existence every damned day. The more you care about what happens around you, the more difficult the simplest things become. I'm glad I know as little as I do and care as little as I do, he thought. What hell it must be for a scientist who sees the edge of life that we're approaching; or the diplomat who knows the future may explode; or the philosopher who gets a good glimpse of futility, naked and full-blown. What a job those men must have organizing their personal futures. Let me lighten the load of responsibilities. What's keeping Del and me apart right now is too much thinking, too much consciousness. She's afraid that I'm too demanding and slick; I'm afraid she's too demanding and unreliable. Well, we've staked out a large-enough piece of jungle to clear up. Let's keep our eyes fixed right on it and not let the passage of time make it any larger.

On the way down the stairs, she said, "How's Iris?"

He knew she had been considering the question. "Fine.

Acting away. I dare say she's discovered by now that I've left."

"Is she coming East when she finishes that job?"

"I don't know. We left it indefinite."

"Uh-huh," she said. "How's the weather been? Nice and smoggy?"

He knew she wouldn't ask whether he had any plans for a divorce. It would imply that she was pressing for action.

"Smog!" he scoffed. "Don't believe that Florida propaganda. Hardly a day when you can't see your hand before your face at high noon."

Nick had met Guy Parlier three or four times in the course of his work in New York. Once at the reception at the Museum of Modern Art after he had received his second prize, he and Parlier had talked for about half an hour. Parlier had said that they must have lunch some time to discuss Nick's ideas further, but he had never called. Subsequently, they had met at various functions and had saluted each other, with diminishing but still warm recognition. Doubtlessly, Parlier had intended to invite him to lunch, but doubtlessly the torrent of demands on his time had swept the idea past opportune recall. It had become just one more of the things he would have liked to do; and what might have been a friendship had become a matter of salutes in a corridor. It had happened to Nick with others; he understood and had only regret, no resentment.

Nick knew that in an office as large as Parlier's most of the hiring was done by a personnel director. Parlier himself would engage only two kinds of designers: chief associates and men who would function more as account executives than creators. Benson, the man who was leaving, was one of the firm's best idea men; besides, Parlier must know or must have heard that Nick would be no use at client "servicing." Therefore this personal invitation to lunch was a clear confirmation of the type and level of the position for which he was being

considered. Parlier might possibly have forgotten that he was keeping a long-deferred appointment; but he was certainly aware of these other implications of his wire.

On Thursday Nick found Parlier at a choice table in a corner of the 'Chambord, sipping what looked like Cinzano on ice.

"How are you, Mr. Parlier?" he said, shaking hands. "I'm sorry to be late, but I'd forgotten about New York traffic."

"It's worse than it ever was," said Parlier, "and it gets worse all the time." Sit down, please, Nicholas. If you go away for one month just, you will notice a difference when you return. We are rapidly approaching complete immobility. Waiter!"

Parlier still had a considerable French accent, although he had been in America about thirty years. He was in his middle fifties, fairly bald, and had a long nose with a curved tip and a slightly receding chin. His shoulders were somewhat narrow and rounded, and his walk was a bit pigeon-toed. One of his many enemies had once referred to him as "a tall, shuffling rabbit." The remarkable thing about him was that in spite of the fact that his features were not prepossessing, the man in motion was compelling and vibrant. His eyes were sad and intensely luminous; his hands were large and expressive; his voice was uninhibited and seductive. When you first glimpsed him, you thought he was one of the unfortunates in life who are made up of mismatched parts; but when he talked to you, he made himself seem right and attractive as the coruscating mind, the tremendous enthusiasms and hates became apparent.

He had been married four times and was at present divorced. Another facet of his inconsistency was the substantiated story that he was tremendously appealing to women. The four wives were supposed to be the merest surface manifestation of a prodigiously busy private life.

Now his eyes followed a beautiful girl in a plumed hat as

he said, "You are interested in food? I hope so. You are not going to be one of those chopped steak bastards."

"The only time I eat chopped steak is when I make it myself. *A la Sauce Robert.*"

Parlier raised a hand. "Enough. I am convinced. Here is the menu. You have earned it."

"I know what I want," said Nick, "if they have it. Frogs' legs bordelaise."

"Very good. Myself, a sole veronique. And a bottle of Montrachet?" he added.

"Nice," conceded Nick. "They used to have some good '47." He felt as if he had played a fast first set of tennis with a good player and they were both enjoying the game so far.

Parlier wasted little time on the periphery of his purpose. By the time the food was served they were well into the subject for which they had met. Parlier said he had heard ("from Mr. Busy LoPresto") that Nick was in town and had not yet settled his mind; Nick had also probably heard from the same source that Benson was leaving. Was Nick interested in a chat to help Parlier decide whether he wanted to make an offer?

"Certainly," said Nick most politely. "It will also help me to decide whether to accept it if you make it."

"Good," said Parlier at once, and Nick started to tell him about his career. He began with Wank and worked backward: through his five years with Ferdy Bates, his three years with Ryan and Rappaport, his year of study in Chicago, his six months before that in New York and his fine arts course at Harvard. He managed to include—skilfully, he thought—the gold medal he had won at commencement, the papers he had published, the exhibits to which he had contributed, the invitations to address various societies of designers on a number of problems and the award he had won in Chicago; and he concluded with a reminder of the prize that Parlier himself had presented to him.

"Ah, yes," said Parlier. "I remember. We were going to

have lunch. Well"—he turned his sad eyes to Nick—"here we are."

Then he asked Nick why he had left Wank, and Nick told him what he had told Iris and LoPresto and Wank.

"Perfectly reasonable," said Parlier with the bottle in his hand. "Have some more wine. Now do you want me to tell you what I and my associates have been doing or can I assume that you know?"

"You can assume it. I read the newspapers. I go to the shops."

"Good. Now I ask you a question that I ask everyone I am considering seriously to join me. Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

"For a moment I am God. I can command absolutely what I like. I can grant any wish. In the whole world, of anything of any kind that is made by human beings, I can grant you the commission to design or re-design whatever you like. Money, practicality is no drawback. I can grant it. What shall it be?"

Nick thought for a moment, then said, "Everything."

"Have some more wine," said Parlier. "You know, you are either very good or a terrible phony."

"You can find people who think both. But then that's true of almost everybody."

"In creative work," nodded Parlier. "It does not worry me that you are disliked as long as I like you. Tell me, I am remembering now while we talk, your whole theory for which you made the models that won the prize, it was your own development of space modulation. You took Moholy-Nagy's ideas out of sculpture and architecture into applied design."

"That's right."

"What happened to those theories?"

"Oh," said Nick, "they were sort of good things to have behind me. Very stimulating. A kind of seed-bed. But then I went to work for R & R and there were practical problems to solve. Clients weren't interested in my pet theories."

"You were very firm about them at the time, I think."

"Of course. I was twenty-five."

"And now you are . . ."

"Thirty-five."

"So tell me. Out with Wank you were chief designer."

"Unavoidably. I was practically the only designer."

"But at Ryan and Rappaport you worked on teams. You have not done that for some time. You think you could still work on a design team?"

Well, thought Nick, we now definitely leave Route 9 for Route 9A. The roads diverge. We roll further and further from an office of my own. *C'est ça*.

"Most of the work in your office is done by teams, I suppose."

"Yes," said Parlier. "The projects are too big for one man, however good."

"Yes . . . Oh, I'm sure I could do it. With one qualification. I think I would want you to make me the head of whatever project you assigned me to. I would want to run my team."

"I would want you to. That's why I am here today myself. To judge whether you can. So," said Parlier, "we hypothesize. We assume that I like you and you like me and we reach agreements and you come to work. You get an assignment and it excites you. You discuss it with your associates, your team, you cook over it and guide it, you live it and dream it and eat it for weeks. You submit it to me and I say, 'Very good; except where it is straight, make it round, and where it is round, make a wiggle.' Then what do you reply?"

Nick said, "A designer isn't an easel painter. As you say, he's part of a group."

"You can take it?"

He remembered Mr. Wank's strips, among other things. "I'm thirty-five now."

Parlier said. "How about some fresh fruit? Very good for the digestive tract."

"Excellent."

"Waiter," said Parlier. "So, Nicholas, you continue to think over the week-end whether you want to work with me. I shall think over the same thing. Perhaps you will come to my office Monday at three. Perhaps you will bring a portfolio, some photographs—just to refresh my memory. I promise you that will be all I shall ask. We shall settle it one way or another, then and there."

"Very good."

The waiter approached and Parlier looked questioningly at Nick.

"Spanish melon," he said.

"For two," said Parlier.

[2]

AS soon as the paint was dry in the studio and the smell aired out, Nick gave a large party to celebrate his job with Parlier. He was to start work on a Monday; the preceding Saturday night he gave the party. It served as much to pick up the threads of his former friendships in one handful as to celebrate the job, and it was as much Del's idea as his own.

She had come over the Sunday before to help him paint the studio, wearing an old shirt, a pair of blue jeans and beat-up ballet slippers. He had seen her only once since the night of their dinner; they had gone to a French movie on Friday night. He didn't like seeing her so infrequently; it seemed out of key with their feelings toward each other, but he didn't want to press her. He wondered between times, not whom she was with but whether, if she were asked suddenly at any moment whether she loved him, what she would reply.

When they met, everything was all right. They were themselves, together. It was not so much happiness he felt when he saw her as a wonderful kind of comfort that told him they were living two lives: one with other people, one with each other; and the first had not yet touched the second.

He helped her off with her coat ("Why are there always buttons missing on your coats?"), then folded her in his arms and kissed her.

"Mmm," she said. "Reporting for work."

"That so?" He nuzzled her cheek. "Say, miss, what's a pretty young schoolmarm like you doing in this part of the West?"

"Oh," she said, "they told me that men would invite me to their rooms to paint." She pushed him away and pointed toward the studio. "So paint."

He liked this best, their working together. In the Wank office he had been able to see her almost as often as if they lived together. They had been able to be with each other without having to pay specific attention to each other; and the mutual concentration on something outside themselves had brought them closer than time spent together attending only to each other. They recaptured that feeling this day as, in old clothes, they painted and smoked and had tea and smoked and painted, alone in the high-ceilinged studio on a very quiet Sunday.

In spite of this closeness or perhaps because of it, Del talked a good deal about some of her other friends. "The one I liked best is this Kenneth Mayer. I told you about him."

"You mentioned his name. He's the one who calls you Bosky Del."

"That's right."

"Pretty dreadful. I'm not sure I care to have him around you. He sounds too much like the kind of fellow I like. What's he do at Tappan?"

"He's an associate editor on *He-Man*."

"Would that be their magazine for men, perhaps?"

"Clever one," she said. "And talk about miscasting! Kenny is a poet. He sits there all day editing these articles about hunting eagles in Honduras and how to get more speed out of your sports car, and all the time he's thinking of some rhyme scheme or some figure of speech."

"Any of his poems been published?"

"Some. In those little magazines. I mean *lit. l.* He let me read a couple."

"How were they?"

"I didn't get them. But he looks so right. For a poet, I mean. He's tall and thin and a little round-shouldered and his

hair keeps falling in his eyes and he keeps losing things." She laughed. "He's a wreck."

Nick finished off a corner carefully. "I'm afraid I like the sound of him." He took the cigarette from the corner of his mouth and blew smoke through his nostrils. "You and he work together a lot?"

"No; but we have lunch together a couple of times a week. We like a lot of the same things, even if I don't understand his poems. He thinks Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens are terrific. He thinks 'Sunday Morning' by Stevens is the best poem of the twentieth century."

"Do you?"

"I don't have a best. But I like poems more about—well—about things that mean more to me. Like that Stephen Spender poem, 'I Think Continually of Those Who were Truly Great.' "

"Does that mean more to you? I didn't know you were so ambitious."

"Oh, it's not that kind of great. Not famous-great. Great for other reasons." She went on quickly without hesitation and almost without expression:

"Whose lovely ambition
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the spirit clothed from head to foot in song.
And who hoarded from the spring branches
The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms.' "

"That's nice," said Nick, stirring paint. "Say more."

"No. Too heady. It's all about never forgetting the delight of the blood nor the grave evening demand for love. Too risky, up here alone with you like this. Who could hear me scream?"

"I could."

"And I'll bet you're a connoisseur of screams."

"I've had my little triumphs," he said modestly.

"Go soak your head in that can of paint." Then she said,

"No, don't. Matter of fact, in that old blue shirt and needing a shave like that and with paint spots on the back of your hands, you look very neat and trim, very sexy."

He was sitting on his haunches. "I'm glad you mentioned that word."

She regarded him apprehensively. "What, trim?"

He smiled. "No."

She moved to rise "Didn't I hear the phone——"

"Sit down." She sat. "And don't be silly. This is me." She didn't quite relax. "We've never even mentioned—I mean, I don't know even whether—whether you——"

She blushed deeply. "Oh, y-you want to know, do you?"

Oddly he felt touched by the fact that she had blushed. "It doesn't matter a damn. I just said I don't even know. Whether."

Still red; she said defiantly, "I don't care, I'm not ashamed of it. I—I'm pure as the driven snow. A phrase I just made up."

"Well," he said, "I suppose I really did know." He lit a cigarette to indicate that he wasn't going to move toward her. "Del, I'd like to say something on this here little subject. May I?"

"Just so long as you don't upset me or make me cry or anything."

"I'll try not to, but who can tell with you? Anyway, it's this. I want you like I never wanted anyone. In addition to loving you, I think you're very luscious. But . . . right now . . . it would simply be a hell of a complication." She was staring at the floor, her cheeks burning. "The only reason I'm dwelling on it this way is so you'll know, if I don't keep trying to ravish you, it's not because there's anything wrong with you. Or me," he added.

"Nick," she said, her eyes still averted, "I knew all that. Honest. But I'll tell *you* something. I—I always hated the idea of it before. I never even liked all the heavy necking the girls used to do. I never could do it, I don't know why, I'm not so goddam angelic. I just never could do it. And I still think I'm not interested. But if there ever was going to be anyone . . .

Well, all I mean is, I used to think I knew how I felt about sex. Now I don't."

"You bet you don't. Unsullied girls never do; and sullied ones don't know until a couple of years after they start sullying."

She blushed and laughed and shook her head. "You clown."

"Come on, kid," he said, getting up, "let's get on with the job. I'm in no mood to pay overtime."

He kissed her quite a lot while they were making dinner and she clung to him fondly, in between the times he was showing her the proper way to peel an onion or mix mayonnaise.

("My goodness, you make your own mayonnaise? I never heard of that before!")

"I'd just as soon use a pre-packed frozen TV dinner as store mayonnaise.")

They sat down in front of the fireplace to a big bowl of lobster salad and a fragrant platter of German fried potatoes. "It's delicious," she said. "You can do anything." He was silent. "What's the matter?"

"I was just checking it over in my mind. You're right, I can."

"Including," as she speared a rich chunk of lobster, "making me fat."

"But on that beam of yours, who will notice?"

"Flatterer." She swallowed. "As soon as the paint dries in there, are you going to start work? Have you got any commissions?"

"No, I haven't really looked for any. I don't know whether I want to work on my own or get a staff job."

"Oh. I thought that maybe . . ."

"What?"

"Nothing," she said stubbornly. "It's none of my business."

"But I haven't been loafing completely. I had lunch with a man this week. Guy Parlier. Ever hear of him?"

"Good grief!" Her mouth made its little 'o.' "Ever hear of

him? No; tell me, pray. And who's Dali and Cole Porter while you're at it?"

"Well, anyway, we got on pretty well. I'm going to see him again tomorrow. If everything works out, maybe he'll offer me a job and maybe I'll take it. As a chief associate."

"But, Nick——" she said excitedly, then restrained herself. "I'm sorry, but Nick, isn't that *wonderful*? I mean, if you're not going to have your own place, isn't that the most wonderful other thing that could happen?"

"Well, as you say, if I'm going to work for someone else, I'd just as soon work for him."

"You slay me; you know that." She folded her arms. "I'm glad the main course is cold, so I can just fold my arms and sit back and regard you."

"Your potatoes will freeze, but regard me if you like. I like it."

"You know, you baffle me. I mean, that's exactly what I mean, what I don't understand about you. You're so calm about everything. So bored. A man like Parlier gives you the nod and you're not excited, you're not bursting out at the seams to tell a person——"

"You're wrong, Del. I'm not bored. Not a bit of it. I love designing. And if I work for him, I think it will be fun. Real fun. Just because I don't blow a gasket doesn't mean——well, it's just that when things like that happen, I sort of feel 'That's how it goes.'"

"But you're so smooth, so poised about these big deals. I could never be."

"Then don't be. If it *is* a big deal. Why do you have to be exactly like me?"

"It just makes me feel like such a stupid kid."

"Well," ^{he} said thoughtfully, "you are. You just happen to be the stupid kid I love."

"Gee," she said, picking up her fork again, shaking her head, "you might as well be a man from Mars. The Martian I love, of course."

"Well, tell me what to do. To bring me down to earth."

"Celebrate. Or *something*."

"All right, if I get the offer and if I take it, we'll have a party."

"What do you mean, we?"

"I can't give a party alone. I need a hostess."

"Oh, gee, I—I——"

"Aha! Yellow. It's all right for me to be human, but not you."

"Who'll be coming to this party?"

"Friends of mine. People I know. What you'd expect."

"What I'd expect would be murder. A lot of hot shots, I suppose. Mature to the ears."

"I can't help it if I'm twelve years older than you."

"Thirteen, mac. And it isn't a matter of age. They'll all be like you. And I'll be the same old triple jerk."

"Those are my terms. You want a party, you've got to pay for it. Blood, sweat and tears."

"Well, I—I'll think it over, chappie. Would your family be coming?"

"I don't have any family in New York except my Uncle Elwood and my cousin Palmer, and they won't be here. I like them well enough but we've never been buddy-buddy."

"Is your uncle your mother's brother?"

"Yes." He chuckled. "Now *there's* someone I'd like you to meet. My mother."

"She won't be coming, will she?" Del asked quickly.

"No; she's in England. I don't expect her back till spring. When she passes through New York, maybe we'll all have dinner together."

"Mm. Maybe."

"You sure don't have to be scared of Mother. She's relaxed. She's the most relaxed person I know. That may be all she's achieved in life, but boy, a day with Mother is like a week at a tropical beach."

"If you like her so much, why don't you see more of her?"

He shook his head. "I've lived with my mother. The first twenty years. That's over now. As a matter of fact, I probably should have run away when I was ten. She dotes; and that's not good for little boys. Besides, when she's here, she insists on living in Boston and on the Cape, so that settles it."

"Why does she insist?"

"Well, you see—um—well, her father was a Governor of Massachusetts and she sort of feels she owes it to the Commonwealth. Pretty silly."

She put her hand on his arm. "Bear up, Nick. It's no disgrace to have a grandfather who was a governor."

"Nuts to you, miss."

She laughed. "Now *you're* blushing. Gee, I—I should think so. Bragging about your family like that."

He held out the platter of potatoes. "More?"

"No, thanks. I couldn't. Gee, Nick, you know what my grandfather was?"

"Oh, come on——"

"No. I'm not ribbing you, I was just thinking. He was a blacksmith."

"For God's sake. Where?"

"A mining town in Colorado. That was my father's father. My mother's father was a minister."

"What kind?"

"Methodist. I'm ^hMethodist. When I'm anything."

"There's a sprinkling of ministers in my mother's family, too. But something much fancier, I think. Episcopal." He lighted cigarettes for both of them and passed her one. "Well, I'm glad we come from such proper backgrounds. I bet if your grandfather knew you were up here with me, he'd be pretty nervous."

"Listen, buster. I know, and I'm pretty nervous."

"Are you really?"

"Not afraid," she said. "Just nervous."

He said absolutely nothing until he had finished the cigarette

and tossed the butt into the fire. "Anyway, if the job works out and I give the party, will you be my hostess?"

"Hmmm?" She looked up from the fire. "O.K."

There were about thirty people at the party, the first thirty people Nick could think of wanting to see. It was rather nice to hear the pleased note in their voices when he called them and to see the warmth in their faces when they arrived. It gave him the feeling that there had been a role waiting for him here that only he could fill, that while he had been away there had been a gap in the interweaving skeins of their lives. He was old enough to know that departure is the equivalent of death, that if one leaves one is sooner or later forgotten, no matter how well loved; and he had no illusions about ancient Roman friendship in the twentieth century; he didn't suppose that any of these friends would die for him or place their fortunes at his disposal in time of need. But within the framework of the frailty of affection and the lame idealism of the time in which he lived, he felt that he had a place with these people and was surprised to find how much it meant to him.

Friendship, he had often thought, was almost a lost quality in an era of business lunches and playing golf with customers. He wasn't proud of many things about himself, but he did like his pretty good record in what he considered the French attitude toward personal life. That life was his own, not a lubrication station for business or advantage. He hadn't invited Parlier to the party and wouldn't invite him to his home until he was sure he liked him.

"You're feeling pretty pleased with yourself," said Del as she passed him carrying an ice-bucket.

"Damn you. I would go and get myself a girl with intuition."

She had come over early in the afternoon, with lists and bundles, had sent him out on four shopping errands, and had proceeded to prepare food and decorations with a fury that reminded him of the way she used to take dictation and type. Clearly she treated the occasion as a test—not in his eyes, but

for herself; she had planned carefully and now worked away almost white-faced and grim-jawed. He helped her as much as she would let him, but he refrained from telling her to take it easy because he thought if he nudged her in any manner at all, the whole programme would collapse and she might have hysterics. He let her walk her tightrope.

She ended up with a beautiful buffet table grouped around two steaming oyster pies; and she had put vases of thick-leaved branches in each corner of the room with lamps on the floor behind them.

"I thought I was supposed to be the cook and the designer," he said.

"It was nothing. S-so I'll be in bed for a week. Anything for a pal."

"I didn't really want you to do all this. I'd have done this part. I just sort of wanted you to be *my* decoration. And to be here."

"This part is easier."

The first two guests were Bill and Nellie Lawrence, two writers, who happened to have lived in California. They were excellent conversation-makers and quickly got Del into a spirited discussion about Los Angeles drivers. After the next three or four guests arrived, the group was too big for her to feel comfortable and too small to get lost in. She insisted on doing all the drink-making and serving, and Nick let her do it to feel easier. By the time all the guests had arrived and the party was wavy with noise, there was no focus on her. She could go from one group to another with half-excuses. Besides, she was a little drunk by then and was moving rather swiftly and prettily with trays. Nick got a covert look at her from time to time as he himself moved around serving things and laughing at jokes.

"Who is she, Nick?" Eve Reynolds asked. Eve was in her early thirties, a South Carolinian who did public relations for a ladies' glove company. Nick had met her some years ago when he redesigned their trademark and boxes. "She's a real

cup-cake. You must have been workin' fast. Back in New York only a couple of weeks, got yourself a nice girl like that."

He glanced at Del where she was sitting with Myrna Salkow and Carter Beliveau, a handsome blond young man who drew cartoons for *The Manbatter*. "Well, I cheated a little, actually. Knew her before I came here. She used to be my secretary at Wank."

"She's darlin'," said Eve. "And so are you. For rememberin' about the Southern Comfort."

He glanced at her drink. "How's it holding out?"

"Travellin' along, honey. She gain' to work with you in your new job?"

"No. Benson's secretary's been with the firm seven years. A nice woman, so I couldn't—you know. Anyway, Del has a job."

Carter must have said something witty in his sweet, patient, terribly acidulous way, because both girls fell back against the cushions with laughter. Nick wished he could have been over there with them, laughing, but at least he could watch Del. Her eyes closed tightly whenever she laughed and as it subsided, she shook her head slightly. She leaned forward pointing her finger at Carter, stuttering a little as she began to say something, but then some people interposed themselves and Nick was left with Eve. Which wasn't unpleasant.

"Here," he said. "Let me touch up that drink."

[3]

HE had written to Iris shortly after his arrival in New York and he had a reply a couple of days after he started work with Parlier. She always used a thick-thin pen which made her handwriting look like Arabic calligraphy, and the surprising thing that happened when he saw the envelope was that it took him a second to recognize her writing. I hope that's a good sign, he thought.

The letter was in perfect balance. Nothing in it moved in any direction. She was glad he had arrived safely and that the apartment was satisfactory. She was interested to hear that he was seeing Parlier and was sure, whether he took that job or not, that things would open up for him in New York. There wasn't much more to say, but even if there was, she didn't know whether she'd have the strength to say it, she was working so hard. They were going up to Big Bear next week for some location shots. She was thinking about trading in the car for this year's model; a dealer had told her it would cost her only a thousand dollars cash. Was this all right with Nick? Goodbye for now, Iris.

He restrained a tiny irritation at not being missed, which he realized was all ego and no affection, and then was glad of the equanimity of the note. It was a tacit confirmation of release. He sat down at once and wrote a reply, dating it the following day and intending to mail it then. He told her he had the job. He told her, too, that she could trade in the car if she wished and he would find a way to pay for the deal.

One thing the letter made him perceive was how little he was concerned with his current marital situation. It was not constantly, or anywhere near constantly, in the forefront of his mind that he was a married man separated from his wife, involved with another girl; it didn't flash into his consciousness when he woke or blazon itself between him and his work or occur in his dreams. There was a kind of innocent naturalness in it, as if it were appropriate and unremarkable. Since he had been a quite consciously married man for three years, it seemed to ratify the move he had made.

Parlier was paying him the same salary as Wank and had given him an airy corner office overlooking Fifth Avenue and a side street. He had also invited Nick to call him Guy, pronouncing it *à la Française*. (Nick later heard the standard office joke that one could tell the degree of a girl's intimacy with the boss by whether she called him Mr. Parlier or Guy or Ghee.) He had then given Nick his first assignment, "a plum, but a tough plum"—to take charge of a group that was redesigning a line of typewriters and office equipment to compete with the improved styling of postwar European imports.

"For years," Parlier had said, "we told manufacturers that Europeans—French, Italian and sometimes, you wouldn't believe it, the English—are making things more beautifully. They say, no, it's impossible, America leads the world in industrial design, or if they are one per cent. more intelligent, they say, "Could be, but the American public is not yet ready." Well, now they are having it. First, with automobiles. And how I pleaded with them ten years ago. In Detroit I was on my knees pleading. Well, now the cars come. Then railroad trains, typewriters, God knows what. Maybe there are advantages in not having such mass-production like us. You don't have so much at stake with every move you make, it's not such a tremendous gamble.

"Anyway, Nick, here are the photos of the machines we have to beat. And of course," he had said with a confident little nod, "Parlier Associates will beat them. No alternative."

If Nick had had less self-confidence, that last statement might have frightened him. As it was, he had considered it superfluous, mere "boss talk."

After the first conference with his assistants he had a long trestle table put up in his office with a row of various typewriters on it. On Tuesday morning, he was rolling a stenographer's chair from one machine to another, testing them for comfort and simplicity of operation, when Eve Reynolds called.

"Hello, honey," she said. "Am I bustin' in an artist's inspiration?"

"No. I was just typing off a dozen typewriters."

"You surely are gifted. I got trouble enough managing one. Honey," she said, "there's some people comin' over tomorrow afternoon to my place for cocktails—just a few—and it would be real nice if you could come too."

"Just a few cocktails?"

She chuckled. She had a brief, warm chuckle, like one live coal. "Now don't you go confusin' me. You know what I mean. I hope you can come."

"I can and I'd love to."

Eve had a pleasant apartment on Murray Hill and her six guests were pleasant people, all of whom were in the ladies' wear business. When they heard that Nick was a designer, it meant only one thing to them and he had to disabuse them. The others were drinking Eve's favourite drink, Southern Comfort on finely cracked ice, but Nick had Scotch. As Eve refilled his glass, she said, "Honey, if you're not busy for dinner, you can stay on here and take your chances. I'm just goin' to clean out the icebox and make some biscuits, but I'd admire to have you stay."

"Be delighted. I remember your fine Carolinian hand with food."

The last guest departed about seven, a stout lady and a buyer from Seattle. As they left, she was saying to him "When you see Sol Fairfax again, you tell him you were talking to someone who had faith in ready-made sports wear

before anybody else on the West Coast." There was a tipsy holiness about the remark that Nick thought touching.

"Well," said Eve as she closed the door, "now for some food. You must be starvin'."

"As the fellow says, I could eat. What can I do to help?"

"Not a thing. You can set that little bitty table there if you like. Then help yourself to another drink. That's all."

She had made smothered chicken the day before and there was plenty left for two. She fixed some green beans with bacon and some fresh biscuits, and in half an hour they sat down to an aromatic dinner.

"Looks wonderful. Smells wonderful."

"Well, it's just some bits an' pieces. But I thought you might like it better than chasin' off somewhere by yourself at this hour."

Eve was beginning to get a few grey hairs, he could see, shining in the yellow light of the wall bracket. He knew she would never dye them. Her figure was somewhat ample, but not in the least gross or fat. She wore her hair parted on the side and brushed back cleanly from her forehead, hanging just below her ears. She had no remarkable features except two nice dimples. Tonight she was wearing a white shirt-waist with a simple round collar and a small black shoestring bow tie. That simplicity combined with the soft maturity of her face, reminded Nick of an actor he had once met after a performance. The actor had been heavily made up for his role and had played a highly emotional part; now, after the show, he looked purged and a little pink with a bow tie below his slightly tired face. Nick was familiar enough with Eve's life to know that she had been through great stress and that she had dropped the mask.

"You like a glass of beer, honey?"

"Do you have any of that German dark beer you used to give me?"

"Sure do. I'll get some."

Nick had first met Eve just as she was coming to the end of

a crushingly unhappy love affair with a Swedish engineer who had spent a couple of years in this country and who had decided not to take her back with him. Nick and she had become friendly rather quickly as they worked together; over drinks, in a reticent gentle way, and obsessed with a dread of boring him, she had talked as she had very much wanted to talk to someone. Not the facts of the story but what she had endured had given him a respect for her. She reminded him of Whitman's line: "I am the man. I suffered. I was there."

"What do you hear from Iris?" she asked when she returned. "The TV pictures goin' good?"

"Pretty good. She's working very hard."

"That surely is one pretty girl, Nick. No surprise at all they want her in their pictures."

"Mm."

"Is she fixin' to come on out here for a while after she finishes this job?"

"She may." In response to questions at his party on Saturday, he had told his friends that Iris wasn't with him because of her work. "Then again maybe not."

"I see," said Eve, swallowing discreetly.

"What does that mean?" he asked with a smile.

"Nothin' at all," she replied, her grey eyes fixed honestly on him.

"You know everything I haven't said, don't you?"

"Nick, honey, I don't know any more than you want me to know. Too many people goin' around puttin' two and two together all the time, only it's *their* two and two, not the facts of the case."

"Not you. You're not the type. That's why I don't mind telling you that what it looks like in this case, it really is. We've separated."

"I'm sorry, Nick. I truly am."

"That's just because you don't want anybody to be hurt, you silly girl. But nobody much is being hurt in this one. That's probably why it's the right thing to do."

"At least that's good, then."

"Yes. Incidentally, I wouldn't mind if not too many people knew about it just yet."

"Of course." She changed the subject with an air that made Nick feel she appreciated his letting her know the truth, she cared and was flattered, but she didn't want to know any more about his personal affairs just now. This both amused and pleased him. "How you likin' your new job?" she asked. "Or is it too early to tell?"

"I can tell some things. Parlier isn't a romancer. With him you aren't marvellous one day and a tramp the next. He just expects you to be good most of the time and to make some mistakes."

"That must be nice and comfortable."

"Well, at least it lets you breathe. He gives you a job and some good men to work with and then he leaves you alone. Of course I haven't gone through the mill with him yet on finished designs. He's given me a good clear warning that he frequently wants things his way. But, as I told him, it's his company."

"Oh, Nick," she said nodding, "you're so right. If you can just get that through your head, you save yourself so much wear and tear."

"I told him I just want the chance to have some fun with a job, to get excited about it, to do the best I can. After that it's up to him. Of course I'll groan if he ruins it—but I doubt that he will. Anyway what can I do? I don't own the world. And I'll have had my fun before they ruin it."

"*Laissez faire*, honey. That's the motto of my life. I'd like to put it up on the wall right yonder." She said "rye chonder." "That's what I keep tellin' them in my office. I'll plan the campaigns for them, hard as my little moth-eaten ol' brain will let me. It's up to them to use 'em or not."

"Are you still liking *your* job?"

"It's all right. It's always somethin' a little different, so it's never dull, and they're real nice people. Mr. Marcus always

been a woolly lamb to me. So if it's not borin' and they're real nice people, that's enough. I'm not out to win any medals."

"What are you out for, Eve?"

She was sitting back in her armchair. She looked at him and shook her head. "Well, honey, you know about the girl when the judge asked her how come she didn't scream when the man attacked her. She said her pappy was upstairs asleep and he was a hard-workin' man who needed his rest. I guess what I'm out for," she said, "is no trouble."

"I'll drink to that," Nick said.

He left Eve's apartment about ten o'clock, strolled over to Fifth Avenue and took the bus, intending to ride all the way to Washington Square. When he got to Fourteenth Street, he thought of Del. He had spoken to her on Monday, but he had not seen her since the Saturday before. He got off and phoned her.

"Hi, Nick," she said, and he could tell by her voice that there were other people present and that it was probably a party.

"Brightness fall from the air," he said. "Or from your voice, at least. Sounds like madness on Thirteenth Street."

"Oh, just some characters making slightly merry. Why don't you come up?"

"Well, you've got your place cards all made out. I don't want to upset things."

"Look. L-let's just leave protocol to the State Department. You pitter-patter right up here."

He wanted to see her and the last thing he wanted to be with Del was stuffy and formal. Middle-aged. "Well, only because I want to, then."

He was going to stop at a liquor store and get some Scotch, but he decided that if he brought a bottle it would have to be gin. And he didn't want to drink gin on top of what he'd already had this evening. Instead, he stopped in a grocery store and bought a half dozen cans of beer.

At the top of the stair Del waited for him, glass in hand. "Packages, yet," she said as she watched him ascend. "Beware the Nicks bearing gifts."

"Gifting beers," he said. She didn't wait for him to catch his breath, she put one arm around his neck and kissed him completely.

"Hello," she said. "I'm glad to see you."

"So I gather. You taste nice. Here," he handed her the bag, "from me to your Frigidaire."

"The thoughtful type. You really are. In command of every situation. Come on in."

Myrna came toward him as he entered the room, warming him with her generous smile. "Hello, Nick," she said. "Glad to see you."

He shook hands with her. "Myrna. You're looking yourself this evening."

Del, in the kitchenette, said, "Introduce him around, Myrna."

He met Gene, Myrna's friend, who had auburn ringlets, a Shelleyan profile and yellow-stained fingers; Muriel Voss, a remote, buxom girl with deep black eyes; and Kenneth Mayer, who fitted Del's description exactly. Nick knew the name before he was introduced. "Happy to meet you."

Kenneth nodded in a kind of stiff-necked way, from the shoulders up. "Likewise, Nick. I guess we've heard about each other."

"Here." Del handed Nick a glass. "Drink up, boy. The beer is flowing like beer."

"Thanks. I hope I'm not breaking into anything here. If you——"

"Nothing to break into," said Del. "Ken and Muriel and I were just having dinner together, and then we decided to come down here and demolish the beer in the icebox, and then Myrna and Gene came home. That's all."

"Do you work at Tappan, Muriel?" He didn't call her Miss Voss to keep from sounding avuncular.

"Yes. With Delia. Right at the next desk."

"Both a couple of lowly secretaries," said Kenneth. "I probably shouldn't be seen with them."

"D-don't worry, boy," said Del. "You rarely are."

"How's your new job, Nick?" asked Myrna.

"Oh, fine." He didn't want to talk about it, it was badly disproportionate in this setting. "Gene, you don't work at Tappan, do you?"

"Gene doesn't work," said Del. "Nature's nobleman."

Gene produced a slow, lazy grin. "I don't work much, and that's a fact."

Myrna put her hand on Gene's arm. "That's because they're all crazy and you're too good for them." To Nick she said, "He plays a wonderful piano. He's as good as Brubeck and Oscar Peterson, and they all want to give him jobs playing cocktail music."

"But Gene only plays jazz," Nick said.

"He sure does," said Del. "He's the mostest."

"You like jazz, Nick?" Myrna asked.

"Once in a while. I don't qualify right up among the Number One fans, but I can tell New Orleans from Chicago."

"And a lot more, I'll bet," said Myrna. "Just name me one man you like. Just one."

"Oh, well, let's see. I've got that Library of Congress set that Jelly Roll Morton made. I like that about as much as anything."

Myrna said, "That's what I thought."

Gene said to Del, "I'm very happy about him."

"Sunday night," said Myrna, "there's going to be a rent party at a friend of Gene's over on Third Avenue. They've got a piano and a lot of good men will be there. Why don't you come?"

Nick was trying to overcome the ridiculous feeling that he must be gentle with these people, that he was like a strong man among children and had to be careful how he touched and breathed. "I probably can." He supposed that what he felt

was that he was about ten years older and that his salary was probably larger than all of theirs combined. He didn't feel superior because of these things; he was simply conscious of them, and careful. "I'll certainly try to. They still have rent parties, eh?"

"Sure. Always will," said Gene.

"Or anyway as long as there are players like Gene who won't take any guff," Myrna said.

"But aren't there places for a real jazz player to work?" Nick asked.

"Oh, sure," Gene said, a grin still, lighting his incongruously angelic beauty, "I work a little. I get dates, and I sit in with a good bunch once in a while. But you know, it's like everything else; you've got to have a name."

Myrna said, "Jazz is getting just as bad as painting. It doesn't matter how good you are, it only matters who says you're good."

"Oh, well," said Gene easily, "I get along." His coat and trousers not only didn't match, they clashed. His socks hung garterless and his shoes were scuffed. "I work a little and I sleep a lot."

"That big ape," said Kenneth, "just turned down a job for two hundred a week. Because he'd have to play arrangements with a dance band."

"Man of principle," said Nick.

"Naw; nothing that fancy," said Gene. "I just don't like people to dance when I'm playing. And I don't like to play what someone's writ down for me."

"You ought to hear him, Nick," said Myrna. "He really is great. Try to come Sunday."

He smiled, knowing that if he went it would be as much because he liked Myrna and her feeling for Gene as to hear the jazz. "I'll try hard." But he had to talk to Del first, to find out whether she was going with Kenneth. He didn't want to tag along. "I'm just not absolutely sure about the week-end."

Kenneth said, "I don't care how he protests, I think this

lad ought to be preserved under glass. How many people are there—well, I don't want to make him mad again by saying principle—who do only what they want to do?"

"Well, don't you?" said Del. "Your poems are your poems, aren't they?"

"I suppose so, but instead of spending my days refining my soul by listening to Haydn, what am I doing? Up there making verbs out of nouns for *He-Man*."

"Oh, aren't we being a little grim?" said Nick. "Aren't there a lot of people who do things just to make a living? So that they can have their own time for their own work?"

"Yes, but there's something about Gene that's pure. He won't even make mock obeisance to the bitch goddess. A free man. Pristine."

Myrna stroked Gene's arm. "Pristinest man I know." Gene was sitting back, still smiling, enjoying it all lazily and beautifully.

"Well, maybe he's got ravens feeding him, like Elijah," said Nick.

"Elijah who?" said Gene.

Del said, "Oh, th-that's just something out of the Bible. You've got to keep an eye on this one, Gene. Pretty sneaky."

"You'll see," said Kenneth. "The rest of us will worry about hospitalization and insurance and how we're going to take care of our parents when they get old, and Gene will never give it all a thought and he'll bounce right out there ahead of us. Without ever having turned a finger for anything he didn't like."

"For God's sake," said Del, "will you stop talking as if you were Benedict Arnold or Judas or something? All you're trying to do is eat and keep a roof over your mother's head, and none of it's touched your writing, for God's sake, has it? I—I don't see how you can consider yourself commercial. I can't even understand your goddam poems."

Nick noted the heat with which she attacked Kenneth's derogation of himself. He was proud of her in a way; but it

gave him a funny twinge, as if he had seen his wife kiss a friend fully on the mouth instead of the cheek.

"Thanks," said Kenneth with a stiff, humorous nod. "But I've put myself within range of their guns. Not like Gene. Already they're talking of sending me down to Key West to do a story. I'd love to go to Key West and I'd probably do the story well. And they'd pay me well. And away we go."

"Oh," said Nick, "you just want to be protected against your own character."

"Of course. Who's a superman? The best guarantee of fidelity to principles is a private income. If you're not Gene. Haven't you ever had the tussle yourself?"

"Well, I'm lucky," said Nick. "Things dovetail. In my job I can earn a living doing what I want to do."

"They give you a free hand?" asked Kenneth.

"More or less. As these things go. Free enough."

"More or less. But isn't——" Kenneth halted. "I see. That sounds good."

Nick knew what the younger man had stopped himself from saying but he didn't care.

"That sure sounds good," Kenneth went on, as if to put another coat of varnish over the crack in his first response. "Still you've got to hand it to Pal Gene here. The Declaration of Independence in person."

"Boy," said Gene, "all this sweet talk is making me thirsty. More beer."

Del leapt to her feet. "Coming up. Courtesy of the perfect dovetail." She indicated Nick with a wave as she went back to the kitchenette.

Nick was slightly nettled by her remark—almost as if it were a small breach of loyalty. Then he chided himself, remembering that, as much as he loved her, he could not expect her to be himself; as she had pointed out, she was thirteen years younger. They were all younger. They simply had not threaded their way far enough through the forest to have thrown away the rule-books and developed instincts.

There was a good deal more than twenty-five blocks separating this place from Eve's.

"Baby," said Myrna to Gene, "I thought you wanted to go over to your place for a game of chess."

"I do. Soon as I swallow up another beer."

"Chess," said Nick. "Is there no limit to this man's talents?"

"No," said Myrna, and Nick laughed.

"Here," said Del to Gene, "here's your brew. J-just pour it down that Athenian throat."

"Thanks, babe."

"Muriel," said Del, "another for you?"

The dark-eyed girl, who had been sitting silently with one leg folded under her, shook her head and said almost petulantly, "I don't want any more."

Myrna and Gene left in a few minutes, after Nick had promised again to try to attend the rent party. Then in a few more minutes Muriel stood up and said, "I guess I better be getting home."

Kenneth said, "I'll take you to the subway."

"Let's all take her to the subway," said Del. "I could use a breath of air."

While they were sorting out and wrestling into coats, Nick said to Muriel, "We were all talking so much, Muriel, you never got a chance to say what you thought about anything."

"I haven't got anything to say," she said. "Anyway, I couldn't care less."

"*Sans souci*," said Kenneth. "That's our girl Muriel."

"That's me," she said, and Nick could see now that, besides having preternaturally dark eyes, she had dark circles under her eyes.

He felt that this was territory for which he had no map, so he made no further attempt to talk to her. On the way down to the Fourth Street station, he said to Del that it was a shame that her kitchenette hung out in the open that way. In his studio there was a work-bench with a power saw; he would build a screen for her.

"That I would like," said Del. "If it won't make the room look smaller."

"It could make the room look larger," said Nick. "I'll paint something on it in deep perspective. I know where I can get some swipes. You know those stage sets the Italians used in the seventeenth century?"

"I guess I missed that show."

"Well, there were a couple of fellows named Bibiena. I'll just lift a little something from them and the screen will make the room look deeper."

At the subway steps the three of them bade good night to Muriel. Nick said, "Good night, Muriel. Hope we run into each other again."

"Thanks," said Muriel. "Maybe."

Del said, "'night, baby. See you in the morning."

Muriel nodded and kissed her cheek and went down the steps.

Nick said, "I know she wasn't just rude. Something's wrong. Isn't she well?"

Kenneth, bundled in his coat with the collar up and his hands in his pockets, said, "It's a complicated story. She may be going to be very sick. Del and I are worried about her."

"That's why we had dinner with her tonight," said Del, "and made her come down for some beers."

"It's too cold to talk here," said Nick. "Let's go to my place for coffee."

"Sure," said Kenneth, and Nick smiled at his nice lack of false reticence.

As they walked choppily against the wind, Nick said, "I hope I didn't drop any bricks. Nothing I said bothered her, did it?"

"Oh, no," Del answered. "She hadn't said anything all night. She's just scraping bottom generally."

"You see," Kenneth said, "she was married to this fellow she was pretty crazy about. He left her after about three weeks. I don't know why. I gather he just found out he didn't like

her as much as he thought. He went out to Nevada and got a divorce."

"It was bad enough when the divorce came through last week," said Del. "But today her ex-husband got married again. Gee, it looked like throat-cutting time down South."

"There's a lot more to it," said Kenneth. "She's a complicated girl."

"I don't need to know any more," said Nick.

"You mean you can tell all about her already?"

"No; you answered my question and that's all I wanted. Everybody's got troubles. You've got to draw the line somewhere."

"He's right, Ken," said Del. "You know yourself we wouldn't be so interested in Muriel if she weren't right there with us. There's no reason for him to get involved."

"It's too cold to argue," said Kenneth.

"Good," said Nick cheerily.

There was a fire laid in his fireplace, and in a minute it was blazing out warm arms to them. Nick made the coffee and toyed with the idea of getting out brandy and making it brulot. But the only brandy he had was twelve-year-old Courvoisier and as he thought of Kenneth, he thought, "The hell with it," and felt quite pleased with himself.

When he carried the tray into the living-room, Del and Kenneth were seated on the sofa leafing through one of his portfolios that had been lying on the large circular coffee table.

"I've just been showing him a couple of things," said Del. "Do you mind?"

"Mind? I love to show off. Or be shown off."

"I don't blame you," said Kenneth. "Boy, these are terrific. Those lamps, that fireplace, those desks. Gee, terrific."

"A-and look at this," said Del, turning a page. "I think this is my favourite. Look at this dining-room furniture. Isn't that *something*?"

"Best friend and lousiest critic," said Nick as he served the coffee.

"But she's right," said Kenneth. "So simple. So rich."

"That's sort of the whole idea," said Del. "Nick is a no-knobs man."

He liked her being proud and boastful about him. It made him feel that she lived here and the other man was a visitor.

"I see that," said Kenneth. "No frills, no curlicues. It's maybe a little stark sometimes but I like it."

"He's got a whole theory about it, that one," said Del. "He wrote an article about it."

"Yes? What did it say?"

"I can't remember. All I remember is the word 'cultic.'"

"Good girl," said Nick. "Brave lass."

"What did it say, Nick?" asked Kenneth.

Nick hesitated a moment, wondering whether to trouble, then thought: Why not? "Oh, it's not a particularly new idea. The confusion between ornament and design. For a couple of thousand years people were covering the things they made with symbols, mostly religious or superstitious. Things that meant—oh—what the four-leaf clover or the skull-and-bones means to us. Cultic symbols." He winked at Del. "And after the symbols lost their meaning, they still kept using them—or something—just because they were used to filling up those spaces. Well, all that's passing out now. Designers are getting their effects with materials, not curlicues and knobs. We've got more materials to work with than ever before: chromium, plastics, new textiles. So the new password is form and texture, not ornaments. That's all."

"Look at him," said Del happily. "He's blushing."

"Lot of talk," said Nick.

"I get it," said Kenneth. "Would you believe it, Nick, very much the same thing is happening in poetry?"

"No; I wouldn't believe it," said Nick. "Poetry seems to me to be getting more complicated all the time, more of a private code."

"Oh, boy," said Del, "now you've done it. K. Mayer will now take off."

"No," said Kenneth; "but why won't people take the same trouble with poetry that they will with your designs, troubling to understand something new?"

"Why should they?" Nick said. "They don't owe us anything; we owe them. Nobody has to 'understand' good design. It's supposed to come *to* people, not vice versa. It's supposed to feel better than what they had before, and if it doesn't, they ought to throw it out. It's up to us, not them."

"Well," said Kenneth, "I guess it's a mistake to compare poems and lampshades."

"Probably," Nick said pleasantly. "But you started it."

"Just for that," said Kenneth, "I'm leaving. As soon as I have one more cup of coffee."

Nick poured for him and said, "Well, I'll say this much for you. I wouldn't know what to do if I had to make something that wasn't going to be used, that just existed."

"Ah," said Del, "the problem of today's artist in a nutshell."

"No," said Nick; "that's just the nutshell."

Later, Del retired for a few minutes, and Kenneth said, "Of course you realize we haven't been really talking about art at all. We've just sort of been fencing. In front of Del. I mean, if you were a plumber and I were an arc welder, we'd have been whacking away just the same."

"I think maybe that's truer for you, Kenneth, than for me."

"Why?" said Kenneth almost with a hurt expression. "Don't you consider me a rival?"

Nick laughed. "Sorry, old man. Didn't mean to offend you." Then he thought: No, I don't consider him a rival. That's not egotistical, it's simply true. I know there is a rivalry, working against me with Del; but it's not especially Kenneth.

He leaned forward. "I've got a suggestion. Between friends. Let's just know what we know about the situation, and not discuss it."

It had its effect. Kenneth evidently realized that Nick really

liked him and, at the same time, that he had been made to look a little immature. "O.K. But don't forget. I exist."

"I'm happy to hear it," said Nick. "And I don't say that to everyone."

Del came back, and Nick said, "You missed it. We've just been fighting over you."

"Good. But why did you have to wait till I went to the bathroom?"

"Kenneth lost. He has to take you home."

"Are you throwing me out?" she demanded.

"You betcha. It's late. I'm tired and we all have to get up in the morning."

At the door Del said, "Well, I suppose I'll hear from you again some time?"

"I'll write," said Nick.

Kenneth shook hands and said, "Good night, Nick. It was swell."

"Good night, Ken. See you."

After they had gone (it gave him a mildly unpleasant feeling to see them going down the stairs together), Nick went over and poked the fire apart and put the screen in front of it. He stood there a moment, feeling a new sense of the world around him, as if a hammer blow had intensified fissures that had always been there, making them more apparent. He wasn't in the least afraid. All that had happened was that his curiosity had been amplified. Quite apart from how he felt about Del, he wondered somewhat objectively what was going to happen.

His watch said 1.30. Long day.

[4]

CARTER BELIVEAU called him up the following week and invited him down for a week-end to his place in Bucks County. "Are you just sort of married," asked Carter, "or are you married-married? In other words, do you want to bring a girl?"

"If I do, she might as well wear a scarlet A. By that definition."

"I promise you I'll think the worst. Unless you bring that nice girl who was at your party. The quick one."

"Oh? Did you like her?" said Nick.

"Well, let's put it this way: I thought she was too good for you. Bring her, if you like. Or bring anyone you care to. Liz is coming, so I'll be too busy to pay attention to you or your little doxy."

Liz was Liza Benedict, a night-club singer, whom Carter had been worshipping rather fruitlessly for years.

"Then why in God's name do you want guests?"

"Well, if you must expose my shame, Liz won't come unless there are others. You are 'others.' Are you insulted or will you come?"

"Both," said Nick.

It would never have crossed his mind to invite anyone except Del, but he felt ridiculously proud that Carter had liked her and had thought to suggest her. Before he telephoned her, he considered how to put the invitation so as to overcome any reluctance she might have on the grounds of appearances.

He plunged right in. "Remember Carter Beliveau?"

"The elegant one? The blond cartoonist?"

"Exactly. He's got a place in Bucks County and he's invited me down for the week-end. He suggested that I bring you. Would you like to come?"

"Sure," she said. He burst into laughter. "Wh-what's so goddam funny?" she demanded.

"Sweet stuff," he said after a moment, "promise me you'll never be predictable."

"Oh," she said, "th-that's easy."

"I thought. . . ." He decided not to tell her what he had thought. "Well, they're liable to be all the types you say make you nervous. The high-powered ones."

"I—I suppose I've got to learn," she said. "Anyway, I'm—I'm getting kind of used to being with you on week-ends. I wish I hadn't said that," she added at once.

"Well, don't worry about it. And I won't."

Last week-end he had built the screen for her kitchenette. She had brought over the dimensions on Saturday morning and they had gone to a lumber-yard together and picked out the wood. Nick had built a number of screens and, with her help, it took him only an afternoon to run up the pieces on the power saw, fit the moulding on the panels, and put on the hinges.

"I love the smell of wood and shavings," she said. "Once when we were high-school kids and we were building something, my sister said, when she smelled wood shavings, she understood why Jesus was a carpenter. My wonderful sister, Betty. You never met her, did you?"

"No. You showed me her picture."

"You'd like her. She'd like you. She'd think it was cute the way you figure out things, and when you put them together, they fit. Like those panels. She loves neatness."

"Thank you, ma'am, he said, humbly tugging at his forelock." He ran home the screws with a mechanical screwdriver. "How are things with her and her husband?"

"He's been assigned to sea duty for two months, which is just what they both need right now. And she's teaching school. A private school in Taconia. She's got an M.A."

"From U.C.L.A.?"

"Uh-huh. In education."

"Del, whatever happened to you and college?"

"Oh . . ." She shrugged. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor taking hinges out of a box and sorting out the screws. As she bent forward, her short brown hair hung next to her cheeks with a kind of childlike intimacy. "I don't know, I sort of felt I was getting further and further *into* things. I can't explain it. It's crazy. I just felt that the further I went on, the more everything started to press around me, to cut me off from home base, venturing out too far. It's crazy."

"It sounds," he said as if this couldn't possibly be the real explanation but it was only fair to report it, "as if you were afraid of growing up. Responsibility."

"Of course, silly," she said. "I cut loose just before the end of my sophomore year, just before exams. I couldn't face them. I didn't think I'd get through them, and if I did, I'd only be where I'd have to face more later. I ran away to my uncle in Colorado. He has a ranch. And I rode horses for three months."

"I wish I'd known you then."

"Why? Do you like horses?"

"Fairly well. It's you I like."

"Think you would have straightened me out, eh, pal?"

"I haven't an idea. I just would have liked to be with you." She blushed and lowered her eyes. "What happened then?" he asked.

"Oh, in the fall my mother said I could either go back to college or I could go to secretarial school and learn how to support myself. She was perfectly right, of course. I went to secretarial school. And I made up my mind to do *that* well, at least."

"So I gather. But didn't that take you away from home base?"

"Not the same way. At least, it was sort of on the same plateau, not going up."

"Mm, hm." He sighed. He looked at her seriously. "You know, you're all the time saying, 'It was crazy, it was mad,' but you're not kidding. You *are* nuts." She looked at him swiftly, her eyebrows worried. "But that's all right," he said. "I'm not complaining, I'm just commenting. I wouldn't change a thing about you. Not more than thirty or forty things, anyway." He leaned forward and kissed her, and she returned the kiss fully, a wonderful kiss, again pleasantly shocking to him in such an inexperienced girl.

He sized the screen that night with quick-drying shellac and by morning it was in shape to paint. When Del came over for lunch, she found him with a pot of coffee on one side of him and an old Italian engraving tacked to the wall on the other, sketching in an arched classical vista on the screen.

"You like?" he asked with a brush in his teeth.

"In the following order," she said, "is what I like. One, that blue work shirt with the paint spots on it. Two, your hands. Three, the coffee smell. Four, the screen."

"That's all?"

"That's all." She put her arms around him from behind. "You're so talented."

"No use fighting it; it's true."

By mid-afternoon he had finished the painting, a *trompe-l'œil* which looked like a setting for an opera by Monteverdi or Peri. "Too good for our cruddy apartment," said Del.

"Yes; but take it, anyway."

A peculiar thing happened to him when Del praised his work. It was more than the gratification of being praised, even by someone whose praise he especially wanted. It felt as if, for the moment, they had both left themselves and had met at a rendezvous outside their bodies.

"Del," he said, "what are you doing tonight? Are you going to that rent party of Gene's?"

"I thought I would. Ken's coming by about nine to pick

up Myrna and me. I left it indefinite, but I thought I'd go. Why? You want to come?"

"I'd like to, but—well—I've got a nine-o'clock date in the morning. I was thinking of a movie. Something short."

"You could leave the party early."

"Oh, that's always such a rubbers-and-umbrella thing to do. Looks so prissy. I'd rather skip it. Will you make my apologies to Myrna and Gene? Tell them I'll go some night when we can make the welkin ring."

"What is a welkin?"

"You've got me."

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He hadn't tossed sleeplessly in jealousy that night—he considered himself too much of a fatalist for that—yet his apartment had seemed unduly quiet and chilly as he went through it turning out the lights. It seemed as if there were music off stage that emphasized the silence here.

But the knowledge that he was going to spend the following week-end with her was a sufficiently comfortable thought during the week. He wasn't entirely happy about her going out with other men, and he loved the knowledge that he could see her with some regularity; but he was still strangely content not to see her every day. It was as if he enjoyed having two lives, one of them without her.

On Wednesday morning one of his assistants, Sam Rinaldi, came into his office and said, "Hey, Leonardo."

He looked up from the drawing board. "Yes, mortal?"

"Are you busy tonight? I've got a couple of theatre tickets I'm trying to get rid of. My wife isn't feeling well, and I want to stay home with her."

"Good'lad. What's the show?"

"New hit. *Ice to the Eskimos*."

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"Yes, I read about it. Supposed to be good. Tell you, Sam, can I make a phone call or two and let you know?"

"Sure thing."

He rang Del and she said she had promised to go to a

movie with Muriel Voss. If it were anyone else but Muriel, she could break it easily, but Muriel would read things into it.

"Nuts. It will take months to get other tickets for this show. It's a big hit."

"Why don't you go, anyway? You can tell me all the jokes and funny sayings."

"Well, maybe . . . Anyway, I'll see you at Penn Station on Friday. At five-thirty."

"R-r-right. I'll be the one with the fetching smile."

"God preserve us all."

He was about to ring Sam on the intercom and tell him that he couldn't use the tickets when he realized that to do this would be, by implication, to rush himself into the very situation he wanted to approach slowly. He didn't want to hang his life on Del. Not yet. Not even without her knowledge. Instead he rang Eve Reynolds, explained why it was short notice, and invited her. She accepted happily.

He had a luncheon engagement at the Laurent with a man from the New York sales office of the typewriter firm whose machines he was redesigning. Nick got there a few minutes early, sat at the bar and ordered a Scotch mist. He turned to reach for the bowl of cheese crackers and found that he was next to Ferdy Bates. Ferdy was sitting down and had just discovered him, too.

"Well, well," said Ferdy. "I thought I recognized that back."

Why shouldn't you? thought Nick. That's where the knife went in. "Oh," he said. "Hello, Ferdy." He recalled that he had decided to snub Ferdy if they met. He knew now that such an idea was mere theory: it couldn't stand up against the actuality of eyes and voice.

But Ferdy (Nick could see) was unresolved about putting out his hand and finally decided not to. "How are you, Nick? Gee, you're looking great."

"I feel great." He would talk to him but he was damned he would do more than answer his questions.

"Let me buy you a drink."

"I've ordered one, thanks."

"Oh." To the barman, he said, "Hello, Albert. Gibson, very dry."

Ferdy was a slender, tall man, fair, with easily acceptable, advertising-model features. He had the sharpest, cleanest parting in his hair that Nick had ever seen, almost as if it had been seared on with a ruler and fine iron. He had a beautiful, rich voice and he always wore shirts with button-down collars.

"I had a drink with George LoPresto last week," said Ferdy, "and he told me you were back in town. With Parlier. Been meaning to call and congratulate you. Good stuff, boy."

"Thanks."

"I hear that Iris stayed out on the Coast to do some TV films. How is she?"

"She's great. Everything's great, Ferdy."

"Oh, come on, Nick. We can talk, can't we? Do we have to be enemies?"

"I don't have a care in the world, feller. I'm just sitting here waiting for my drink. And here it is." He sipped it.

"Look, Nick." Ferdy's brows contracted. "Do you have a lunch date here?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, can we have lunch together some time soon?"

"What for, Ferdy? Whatever for?"

"To talk. I'd like to talk to you, Nick. You're still sore about the Peerless business, aren't you?"

Nick turned and looked at him. He had been friends with this man for six years. He had introduced Ferdy to the girl he married; Ferdy was the first man he had told about Iris, they had trudged around to real estate agents together looking for their own office, they'd had coffee in containers together, week-ends, birthdays, Christmases. And now Ferdy wondered whether he was still angry and wanted to "lunch" the anger out of existence.

The whole world, thought Nick, is stark, staring mad. Except me. That is the only sane rule of thumb.

"You're wrong, Ferdy. I was never sore. Did you ever hear me say a sore word about it?"

"Well, there's sore and there's sore. You interpreted the whole thing as a fast deal. You wouldn't see the realities."

"I know. You told me at the time. How our group was unwieldy and the account needed flexibility and, since you'd been working more closely with them, naturally—and so on. You told me."

"Well, every word of it was true."

"I'm sure it was."

"Well, if you really believe that, why are you—why can't we have lunch together?"

Nick smiled a little. "Because maybe some other things are true, too. Or were then."

"Gee, Nick." Ferdy had an honest, pained expression on his agreeable face. "Gee, you never were the most realistic guy in the world. You know that, don't you?"

"Well, that's one we could chase around all day. One man's realism is another man's dream-pipe."

"Boy, I'd gladly leave it to any impartial——"

"Ferdy," said Nick, "I don't want to leave it to anybody. I just want to leave it. Can't we do that?"

"O.K.," said Ferdy. "O.K. But I still think you've got it misconstrued. And I don't mind telling you that if you knew some of my present headaches with Peerless, you wouldn't be so—well, believe me, it's no picnic."

"Things are tough all over, they tell me." He caught sight of the typewriter man and waved to him. "There's my friend." He paid his check and decided to expend one question. "How are Kay and the children?"

"All right. Ronnie just had his tonsils out. They're all all right now."

"Remember me to her, will you?"

"Thanks, Nick. And I'll see you around, hey?"

"Sure."

He walked across the room to the typewriter man. He

felt like laughing but it was so ridiculous it was shocking. He felt very lonely, as if he were the last surviving speaker of a particular language. Or like a Martian who observed and couldn't change things, but was glad he came from another place and at least could remember other allegiances.

That night after the theatre he took Eve to Sardi's for a drink. At one time Nick had been friendly with a scene-designer and had often gone with him to Sardi's, but he had not been back there since his return. The place still gave him the feeling of being the one restaurant in the world where no one kept his eyes on the person he was with. There was a feline, jungle feeling in the air which he found amusing.

"Did you like the show?" he asked Eve.

"Right nice," she said. "Real funny. Didn't you like it?"

"It was fine, fine. Only it's just that Broadway shows get more like movies and TV programmes all the time. You know, they do anything from beginning to end to make you laugh, and if they do that, they're hits."

"Well, honey, what more do you want from a comedy?"

"Oh, I sometimes feel there could be other things. Maybe it's just pickiness. I don't really care. But maybe that's their fault."

"Me, I get just as much fun out of movies," said Eve, "when they're good. But I like to go to the theatre. It's no fun to go to a movie, just the goin'."

When the taxi drew up in front of her house, she invited him up for a nightcap. She said she wasn't tired and if he wasn't she'd love to have him come up for a while. He reflected, simply, that it was always more pleasant to be with Eve than not; and accepted.

She put out a couple of nice cheeses and some crackers with the drinks, then she sat on a hassock in front of his wing chair and they talked quietly, almost as if they didn't want to wake someone in the next room. Unconsciously and irrationally they had adopted that tone as soon as they entered.

She knew the Ferdy Bates story, and he told her about running into Ferdy that day.

"Curious, what it did to me," he said. "First, it taught me a lesson. Because I'd made up my mind beforehand to snub him completely and I found out just how good I am at *that*. But a lot more important . . . the way he behaved . . . it did something to me."

"But, honey, you've been around. You knew there were people like that."

"Sure. That's why I wasn't very much upset when the whole thing first happened. I even remember being surprised that I wasn't very upset. What gets me now is that he doesn't *expect* me to be upset, he thinks it's just a bump in the road and from now on, now that I'm back, we can be buddy-buddy."

"Yes, that could be pretty irritatin'."

"Well, even there he had the advantage over me—although he didn't know it. He made me dig down into all the high-flying adolescent stuff I hadn't thought about for years—you know, the honour of our house and the unspotted flag sort of thing. I didn't want to get priggish with him. After all, what the hell's so fourteen-karat about me?"

"Well, to say the least, you wouldn't ever do the sort of thing he did."

He ducked his head. "Probably not. I hope not. I don't think so. But I hated feeling those absolutely spotless, old ideals getting stirred up again. Matter of fact, I hate digging into myself at all. I think this is the age of digging into yourself, and it gives me a swift pain."

"Well, it's not a bad idea to know what you're made of. But honey, I could have told you what you found out today."

"What's that?"

"That you're not lookin' for trouble, but that you know what you like and don't like. Somewhere in you, you got pretty clear ideas on that subject."

"Don't most people?"

"I suppose. I just like your ideas better than most people's."

And I like the way you don't make no fuss about it. *Laisser faire*, and stick to the nice people."

"Are there enough of them to stick to, I wonder."

"Well, they're sure not in oversupply. But there's always one or two turnin' up. That's one of the reasons I'm glad you came back east."

She was sitting close to him and she suddenly seemed very still. Her eyes didn't waver with embarrassment. Affection and a curious compulsion of courtesy engulfed him. He leaned forward and kissed her.

"That was a nice thing to say."

"That was a nice thing to do," she said.

He stared at her a moment, frowning slightly.

"Well," he said, "it's getting late."

They hardly spoke while he got his coat and put it on. At the door he took her hand. "Good night, dear," he said. "Hope I'll see you soon."

"I'm here," she said. "I'll be here."

In the cab he found himself wishing he hadn't kissed her. He hadn't thought a simple kiss would reveal so much. It was as if he had partially opened a door and glimpsed something he didn't want to see just now.

[5]

THE consistency of human inconsistency was demonstrated yet again by Carter Beliveau's country place. In New York Carter lived in the East Fifties, rose at noon, breakfasted in the Oak Room of the Plaza, frequently spent the afternoon shopping for clothes, dined at eight and danced till one, then worked till three on a cartoon. His place in Bucks County, which Nick expected to be full of picture windows, low-lying furniture and garden statues of blackamoors, turned out to be an eighteenth-century farmhouse, furnished appropriately, situated in the middle of a one-hundred-and-fifty-acre farm, fully equipped and functioning, with a farmer in residence in another building.

"Jekyll and Hyde," said Carter when Nick remarked on his surprise. "The trouble is, I don't know which existence is Hyde."

On Thursday, Nick had flown upstate to the town where the typewriter company had its main plant, and had been the overnight guest of the Vice-President in charge of production. It had been a stimulating day and evening—although he hated salesmanship, he always enjoyed submitting his ideas to men whose chief concern was practicality—and he had not got to bed till late. They had roused him out early to go back to the plant, but he had snatched some sleep on the return flight to New York. He just had time to get to the apartment, bathe and repack his bag, and get to Penn Station to meet Del at 5.30.

"Where am I?" he said as they hurried toward the gates.

"Fear not, my cabbage," said Del, guiding him by the arm. "I have bought the tickets, got the track number; all is secure."

"Bought the tickets, eh? You must be loaded."

"Pay-day. But don't worry about it. You can reimburse."

She behaved on the trip down as if week-ends with Beliveau types, or even with Nick, were commonplace enough; but Nick could tell by the stiff way she sat and the fact that she had dressed exceptionally carefully that she was excited. She smoked a good deal and talked a lot. He thought she looked unusually pale and adorable.

"That's a nice dress," he said.

"Th-this old thing? Merely Bergdorf's best."

"As soon as we get to a less crowded locality, I'm going to give you several nice kisses."

"Sir!"

"How are you? Have you been well all week? How are things, anyway?"

"Fine. Just fine. Everything's ginger-peachy."

"I worry about you. The light-hearted way you and old Myrna live. Do you eat properly? Get decent dinners?"

"Sure. Sometimes I cook, sometimes she does. Sometimes I'm not hungry."

"Because you're upset about something?"

"Not always. Just not hungry sometimes."

"Is it ever, because you're upset about—about us?"

She shrugged. "I think about us, of course. Why shouldn't I?"

"What do you think?"

"Mostly whether we should even see each other."

"Oh, Christ, I thought we'd at least got past that stage."

"It's easy to say a thing's settled."

"You know what, I think everything's going to work out. My crystal ball tells me we're moving together."

"M-maybe so. The point is, is that good?"

He remembered, beneath his love for her, the comfort he

had felt about a separate life: a dreadful but imminent sense of relief at not having always to be responsible for her. But he said, "Of course it's good. If it happens, it's good. That's the test."

She looked at him, her brown eyes searching hard for flaws; but he held fast. Then her eyes grew tender as the fact of him—there, his head next to hers on the car seat—became realer and realer. "Maybe so," she whispered.

Carter was at the station with his convertible. "Welcome to historic Trenton," he said. "Population one hundred and twenty-eight thousand, elevation minus ten."

"Bus for Beliveau's?" asked Nick.

"Yes, sir, where frolic never ceases." He took Del's hands easily, almost wearily. "And this is the reason I invited that man."

"H-hi, Carter," she said. "I almost didn't recognize you without a *canapé* in your fist."

"She knows me already. Dear child. Come, both, get in and we're off for interminable fun."

The three of them sat in the front seat and they drove past the State House, over the bridge into Pennsylvania. Carter kept making comments on places they passed in his patient, biting way, and Del kept laughing.

Liza Benedict was almost forty, slender, husky-voiced, with black eyes and dark hair which she wore piled high on her head. One could sense immediately that she sang mostly in intimate supper clubs; there was nothing italicized or brassy about her. The few times she had appeared in a theatre, she had sung leaning against the proscenium and had made the place seem like an intimate club. She had a devoted following, was quite rich, and was quite unspoiled because she didn't really care about money or success.

"Del," she said, as soon as they had been introduced, "you look bushed. Let me beat you out a little bourbon."

There were two other guests, Oscar and Jane Fowler.

He was a television writer with a long, shadowy face, black-rimmed glasses, and a slow, insistent voice. His wife was small and bony.

Dinner was served at a long table hewn from one large plank, with the candles and firelight making them all beautiful. Liza ate little and the houseman knew enough to keep her highball glass charged. Carter, at the head of the table, told the company about the past summer, which he had spent at his aunt's plantation near Memphis. "I was brought up there," he said. "No wonder I'm so delightfully regal. I never realized why until I emerged into the world and saw how crabbedly other children are brought up. I lived on a barony and when I was tired of it, I could go play on a battlefield."

"Which battlefield?" asked Nick.

"Shiloh. It's right by."

"Do tell. I had a great-grandfather at Shiloh. George LeVerrier. Second Massachusetts Rifles."

"Oh, yes, indeed," said Carter. "Colonel LeVerrier. One of the signs marks his entrenchments. *Very* near those of General Carter Beliveau, C.S.A."

"Really?" said Nick, "I didn't know."

"And just think," said Carter, "here we are over ninety years later, still enemies."

They were sitting at opposite ends of the table and for a moment Nick thought of their great-grandfathers, and thought that now he designed typewriters and pots and Carter drew jokes. But it was a thought he killed deliberately and quickly. He hated "family"; he thought the idea of decadence was decadent; he had devoted his life to celebrating his liberty from those very ideas and their corollaries.

He lifted his wineglass. "To the Stars and Bars," he said. "We'll take our stand in Dixie."

Carter raised his glass in return. Nick discerned a glimmer in Carter's eye of an aristocrat meeting another aristocrat, both in disguise, as in first Thermidor. He didn't like it and didn't want to feel any communion on that level.

"Not me," said Oscar. "The South may be great when you're a kid, but how can you stand it past the age of fifteen? Jane and I drove down to New Orleans last year and between here and there, boy, what a desert. Just like getting in a time machine and going back fifty years. Nothing. One bookstore in a state and that's usually Baptist. Nobody reads."

"Isn't it lovely?" said Carter soothingly. "Nobody reads and nobody pretends to read. Isn't it restful to be among people who don't pretend?"

Liza and Nick laughed. Carter put his hand on Liza's and said, "Goddess."

Oscar glanced sidewise at Nick, still facing Carter. "I don't get it. What's so funny? I'm the one giant intellect present, and I don't get it."

"Dear Oscar," said Carter to Del, who sat on his other side. "He won an award from *Slick Magazine* for the best TV drama of last year, and the laurels are oppressing him."

"Never mind my laurels," said Oscar. "I'm for intellect. What's wrong with this country is too much making fun of intellect."

"I couldn't agree more," said Carter. "Unless it's people pretending to be intellectuals. For instance, so many people pretend they've read things they haven't. Take me, for a captivating instance. All my life, I've been pretending that I've read *Crime and Punishment*. I knew the author's name and some of the characters, and I knew the plot, and whenever anyone mentioned it, I could nod right along with everyone else and sigh in the presence of a masterpiece. But I never really read every word till last summer. In Tennessee, too." He winked at Oscar. "Now let's play a little game. Is there anyone here who honestly has read it? Every word. Honour bright?"

Nick said, "Well, as a matter of fact, yes. At Groton, I remember discovering that it was really all about religion, and I rushed up to tell my master. And he told me he had written a book on that subject."

"All right, Nick. Good marks for you. Oscar, how about you?" said Carter.

"I must have," said Oscar. "I can't remember actually sitting down to read it, but the whole thing is crystal clear in my head."

"Saw the movie?" said Carter. "Saw the play? Read a synopsis? Or really read every blessed word of the book?"

"Listen, senator," said Oscar, "I said I can't remember. If you're trying to hoist me, you may have picked the right petard. But it doesn't disprove my point."

"No, *cher ami*," said Carter; "it only demonstrates why I liked my summer at home. And it also proves that we intellectuals must go in there and burrow. On guard! Hit the line hard!"

"If you think I'm sorry I started all this," said Oscar, "you're right."

"You're always sticking your neck out," said his wife.

"And you're always there to tell me, sweetheart," said Oscar.

"Del," said Carter, "promise you won't say a word."

"About what?"

"About anything. I want you to preserve that unblemished silence all through dinner." He raised a hand. "No, no; don't protest. I love it. It's nymph-like and befitting."

"Now, Carter," said Liza, "stop teasing her. Anyway, how would she get to say anything, with all the gassing you do?"

"Yeah, hey," said Del.

After dinner they clustered around an even bigger fire in the living-room, clutching brandy snifters and mild camaraderie. Over the mantel was a framed caricature that Carter had drawn of Liza, the kind of caricature that shows how highly the artist thinks of his subject. It was frequently used in advertisements and had become Liza's trademark.

"Oh, that's the original," said Del.

"No," said Carter as he put the hassock beneath Liza's

feet and put a highball near her hand; "she is. But that's second best."

"I think they're both terrific," said Del.

Carter looked at Nick. "You see. I have an infallible instinct. I knew that mousy creature had good taste."

"Carter," said Liza, "behave."

"No, no," said Del; "it's all right. I was voted Miss Mousiest in my high-school class."

Nick thought she looked lovely in her armchair, her legs curled under her. The flames touched and livened her face, made her eyes more silky, her attention more grave. She sat and sipped her brandy and he felt again a queer glow of pride when he saw her drink, as if she were precocious. She drank not only as if she liked it, but as if it helped establish her right to be a member of the company, of the race. She enjoyed it but it was also a tribal ritual.

He winked at her across the warmth of the fire, and she rolled her eyes like a soubrette.

There was more brandy and smoking and talking, and Oscar, who was slightly drunk, began to attack Carter for his work. He chided him for spending his time on jokes for the fur-bearing smart set, and Carter implored him please not to get down to brass tacks; they were, in fact, so tacky. But Oscar insisted that Carter was wasting his gifts, and then Carter asked why a good writer was writing for television where anything that was not inane was thought masterly and a script with three-syllable words in it was accounted Jamesian. The greatest medium of our day, replied Oscar, the largest effect. Just a little larger than comic books, said Carter.

Nick sat easily, enthroned, between Oscar's sardonic insistence and Carter's patient parries and ripostes, but really not listening to it at all, letting it create a kind of *ostinato* under the bond across the room between him and Del. It's curious, he thought, how much I love her, seeing that she fills me with such trepidation.

Where is Iris at this very moment? he thought.

Who cares? he thought, and found that he meant it.

Now he realized that Oscar was asking him a question. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't get the last part of that."

Oscar's head was sagging slightly over his third brandy. "I said everyone needs a rationale. Even a designer. Right? Has to see himself as part of the picture. Right?"

"I dare say. I suppose so."

"I mean a man has to see himself as part of his time or he's emasculated. Shackled. Right? What's the use of my writing sonnets or three-volume novels? Today's medium for writers is TV. What's the use of Carter drawing for a hundred thousand snobs when he could be using a camera, with that great eye of his, and reaching millions? A designer has to have a rationale, too. Right?"

"A designer has one. Built-in. He's the man the twentieth century was invented for."

"How's that?"

"Well, chaps like you two," said Nick with conviction, but consciously assuming some of Carter's airiness, "you're hangovers from the past. You have to strong-arm your souls in order to justify doing TV instead of novels or cartoons instead of Madonnas. Not the designer. He's the only artist who's really wanted these days. Who wants an easel painter? When they build a steamship, they buy a mural for the bar. Or a sculptor. When the bank president dies, they buy a bust to face the elevators. But they want me all the time. Because I'm right at the spearhead, where the two lines converge."

"What two lines?" asked Oscar.

"Making things for use, making things for looks. They've been heading toward each other for centuries and now they've met. This is the century when the artist works through industry." He shook his head. "I don't have to scrounge for a rationale. Or rationalization."

Del's eyes were round, brown, and fixed. He looked away; and then he was annoyed at himself for looking away.

"Nick," said Carter, "you chill my blood."

"That's because you're still back there with the magnolias. Face the facts. The world doesn't owe artists a thing. That's what they never understand. The artist has to do something for the world, not vice versa."

Carter said, "Yes, of course, dear boy, but he used to be able to do so many different kinds of things for them."

"It was nice that way," said Nick, "but it's not that way any more; and it's getting less so. I know," he said, anticipating Carter, "that chills your blood. Perhaps it should. But, as the man says, I don't make the rules, I only work here."

He could remember—he used to remember it with some discomfort, but now with a smile—the college days and the Chicago days soon after when he had felt that the world had been placed directly in his care and he would be grievously remiss if he didn't dedicate himself to doing something rather vague but very grand about it. It was as if in himself he had inherited a huge mansion, tradition-laden and expensive. Since then he had found it sensible, not cowardly, to close off a wing: to concentrate on keeping a smaller part of it bright and beautiful. This simply was not a day for large houses, literal or figurative. His altered course was not compromise; it was practical idealism.

Carter sighed. "I have but three comforts in this iron-clad age. Liz, my magnificent talent, and the ever-present possibility of suicide. Wouldn't it be awful if men were immortal?"

Nick said, "Can't agree. Probably would have saved a lot of time."

Oscar said, "Del, do you agree with all this?"

"I—I certainly do when Nick says it," said Del.

"You a designer?" said Oscar.

"No. I'm not."

"What's your work? What do you do?"

"Nothing. Nothing, really."

"Come on," said Oscar. "Is it so horrible? What do you do?"

"I told you. Nothing, really."

Oscar, tipsy, insistent, said, "What do you want to be so coy for? Come on, give. What do you do?"

"Good grief, man," said Del. "I said nothing."

When Nick came down to breakfast next morning, his first impression was that an electrician had changed the lights on a continuous scene. Sunshine was now pouring in, but Oscar was still asking Del what she did.

All of them except Liza, who never rose until noon, were seated around the table, and after greetings had been exchanged, Oscar said, "She thought she was going to get away from me last night just because I was drunk and she was tired. But the Fowler braja never quits."

Nick helped himself to some chicken livers and shirred eggs. "That could be a matter of opinion," he said amiably. "Why is it so important to you what she does?"

"Just like to know people. Besides, once they start dodging, then it gets important."

"Charmer," said Nick. "Del, why don't you tell the man so we can all relax?"

Carter said, "She is a belly dancer at the Café Kootch. She does the Dance of the Seven Veils, only she uses six."

"I wish I had the talent," said Del. "I'm a secretary, Oscar. I do shorthand and typing. I'm also very good at getting theatre tickets, arranging plane and hotel reservations, and calling up the governess to make sure the twins took their vitamin pills. That's the Vanderhoff story," she said. "Think you can handle it?"

"Fine," said Oscar. "Glad to know it. Now the picture is clearer."

"So what?" said Del.

"Now you're more than a name and a face," said Oscar. "Now at least I know some of the facts of your life. Next step—the inner secrets."

"For God's sake," said Del. "Maybe I should have brought a dossier. In triplicate."

"She hasn't got any inner secrets," said Nick easily. "That girl is dull."

"No; let's be serious a moment," said Oscar. "I'll explain why I'm pounding away. Communications. People need to communicate." He pointed to Nick and Carter. "Your jobs tell me something about you two—even if you hadn't sounded off last night. But her job isn't her; it's just rent money. There's more to her. I hate to pass an interesting human being without touching a quick nerve. I guess it's the writer in me."

"How sweet," said Carter. "And do *you* ever get touched—say, with a crowbar?"

"Can't hit a moving target. But seriously, I would like to get a glimmer of what she's really reaching for."

Del said, "If you only knew how I hate people who say 'but seriously.'"

Oscar acted as if no one ever really meant a rebuff to him. "You'll love me yet, little lady. And you'll tell all."

After breakfast Oscar and his wife retired to their room to work over a script that he had to turn in on Monday. Carter took Del and Nick for a tour of the farm. The countryside looked shiny and clean and not particularly real, which was the way Nick liked it.

"What is it with that man Fowler?" asked Nick. "What's bothering him?"

"Oh, Oscar's really nice enough," said Carter. "He's just doing his homework."

"Well, I've known other writers, fellows who used to write for pictures," said Del, "and they never carried on like that. About probing people."

"Not that kind of homework. Oscar used to be a Communist, one of the bright young intellectuals of the party. He pulled out at the right time, bathed in public, and now he's perfectly acceptable. But he has to keep proving that he's really interested in character and soul, that he's not a crass materialist any more."

"Is he really big in TV?" asked Nick.

"Makes a fortune, my boy. That's one of the reasons I like him. I like successful people; they're no happier than others, but their troubles are more interesting. Besides, he's really not a bad sort once you learn how to handle him."

"Can you give me a short course?" asked Del.

"Certainly. Nick knows already. Just say offensive things to him when he asks you questions. He won't be angry; he'll simply take you as an equal and stop patronizing you. Which is what his questions amount to."

Carter escorted them through the barn with its modern equipment and showed them the steers, the dairy cows, the sheep, the pigs, and the ducks. ("No chickens. I hate their stink. Besides, they kill their sick and rape their dead.") He introduced them to the farmer, who looked like a customer's man in a brokerage, then asked to be excused for a brief conference with him.

Nick and Del rested on a pile of feed-bags.

"This is nice," she said. "I like the smell in here. It makes me feel natural."

"But not that Carter. Remarkable fellow. He even manages to walk through a barn as if it were a salon. I guess all this is a Northern equivalent of a plantation."

"Don't say a word against Carter. I may decide to adopt him. He's very tart and lovely."

"Correct!":

"Nick, how long have he and Liz—how long has that been a—a thing?"

"Oh, five or six years. One of the legends of our time. You know, of course, that she's not his mistress?"

"What?"

"She treats him like a faithful dog and he loves it. He's quite frank about it. He follows her about, goes to every one of her performances wherever she's playing, holds her wrap in the wings, phones her twice a day, nurses her when she's sick—but they've never . . . never ever. I think he's given up thinking about her that way."

"For heaven's sake."

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact. I think he likes adoring something unattainable. It's his substitute for religion."

"For heaven's sake," said Del again. She seemed impressed and a little uncomfortable.

Carter came back and she said, "Hi, Carter," as if they had been apart for days.

"Well," he said, "October was a wonderfully profitable month on the farm. I lost only two hundred dollars. Come, children. I'll show you my two saddle horses and then we'll go back and have some coffee."

"With the Grand Inquisitor," said Del.

"Just be nasty," said Nick. "Your host's orders."

"If that's all," she said, "th-then maybe I can handle him."

But by late afternoon there was trouble. Shortly before five Nick was sitting with Liza in her room, the room that Carter had furnished especially for her. She was having her first drink of the day and was playing some of her own recordings for him. They had heard her performance of "My Bill" and were just finishing "Falling in Love with Love."

"The girl is good," said Liza as the last notes of the woodwinds died away.

"Lovely," said Nick. "The best *feminine* singer since Helen Morgan."

"I couldn't agree more."

There was a knock at the door and Del came in. She was white and, although it wasn't visible, Nick knew at once that she was quivering.

"Nick," she said without preamble, "may I speak to you a moment, please?"

He took a second to look at her. "Of course." He got up and turned to Liza on the chaise-longue. "Excuse me, Liz."

"But natch," she said.

He followed Del to a corner of the hall.

"What is it?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

She turned and faced him. She always held herself well but for some reason her carriage improved when she was upset.

"Nick, I want to go home. Please take me home."

"What? What's this all about?"

"Let's not chew it over and have a big debate. *Please*. I—I just want to go home."

"But . . . when I left you, you were sitting looking at Degas prints in the library."

"I know."

"What happened?"

"Our mutual chum . . . that hambone Dostievsky. He turned up."

"Fowler? He started in again?"

"Yes. *Lie down*, Nick. I don't want to talk about it. I just don't want to stay here. I want to go."

"Did you have a fight with him?"

"I—I don't even know. I just got out after a while, and I don't want to stay."

"I'm going to get that guy and——"

"No, please, *no*. I just want to go home."

Her jaw was trembling slightly and her whole frame was rigid. He knew that she realized the embarrassments of leaving: that there was to be a party tonight, that they were all supposed to go to someone else's house tomorrow for lunch.

"All right. You go pack. I'll find Carter."

Leaving was an agony, one of those minor social dislocations that are blindingly painful. It made Nick feel as if his arm were trapped there, like an animal's, and he was tearing himself loose from it in order to get away. Something had to be uttered, a veil of words thrown over the occasion, no matter how transparent, so that all of them could ask and reply and keep at least a fake order in the universe. He told Carter that Del was ill and that he had better get her back to New York; Carter understood at once, of course, and agreed so quickly

that Nick knew he was furious with Oscar. Liza was quiet and sympathetic. The Fowlers were so solicitous about Del's health that it was clear Oscar knew the real reason and had to believe the thin lie in self-defence.

Through it all Del was white and relatively silent.

Carter wanted to drive them to Trenton, but Nick insisted on phoning for a taxi. As Nick was about to follow Del into the car, Carter said, "Have lunch with me at the Oak Room next week. Thursday. Both of you."

Nick glanced at Del, who sat huddled in a corner of the seat. "Love to. And thank you for thinking of it. Because I don't want to say anything else just now."

"Blessings, dear boy. Hurry off. Goodbye, old Del."

"Goodbye, Carter," she said as if she had been suddenly awakened.

The only reason Nick wanted to talk to her in the taxi was so that she wouldn't think he was angry with her. He was indeed angry, scarlet and amazed; the only redeeming feature of this anger was that it was not the sort one feels with strangers. However this was not the time to make it manifest.

He had never been through an experience quite like this. He had never known anyone who would have done what Del had done: who would not, in the circumstances, have managed to muddle through until Monday. It was, in its small way, shocking; and because (even now) he loved her, was angrier because he loved her and was therefore related to her—it was frightening.

She didn't speak until they were in the train and it began to slide out of the station. "Nick, I'm sorry. I—I couldn't have helped it, but I'm sorry."

"Save your strength. This isn't the time to talk about it."

She looked at him, her mouth forming something, then her eyes dropped; she looked at him again, then turned her face to the window and began to cry, as quietly as possible.

He put his hand on hers. "Everyone will think I beat you. I'm proud."

He wondered whether he ought to have faced out Oscar, dressed him down for his boorishness. But that would only have aggravated the situation; besides he could safely leave Oscar to Carter's scalpels. Anyway, he had the odd feeling that what had occurred had happened to Del: not because of Oscar: as if the cause had become shadowed and anonymous, and only the effect remained. Perhaps, he thought, because though that is the way Oscar behaves, it is even more truly the way Del reacts.

Maybe that was why he hadn't really tried to change her mind about leaving: because he had recognized her in her reaction, and was beginning to accept her as herself: not with unvarying pleasure but with fewer judgments.

He persuaded her to come to his place instead of going directly home. When they got there, he asked her whether she wanted a drink or coffee and she said, "Both, please." He made the coffee while she fixed a drink and then they sat before the fireplace.

"Gee, I—I'm glad to be back," she said. "I feel as if I'd been to the moon or something."

"I suppose so. Everything that happens to you happens through a magnifying glass. To other people they're bugs, to you they're dragons."

"Are you trying to tell me that I'm insane?"

"Of course, friend. It's practically the first thing I noticed about you. One of your chief charms, shall we say?"

"All right, let's," she said morosely. Instantly she said, "Do you mean it was my fault, what happened?"

"Take it easy, dear. How did the word 'fault' get into this?" In a way it was true. She couldn't possibly have done much about what happened; he wasn't too disturbed to see that.

"That son of a bitch kept pounding at me and pounding at at me——"

"I know that, Del. I know what happened."

"Because you go around acting as if it were all something that I did." She clutched her glass tightly. "I suppose you think

he was just another party pest and I should have been able to take care of him, the way Carter said."

"Oh, come on, Del, there's no reason to——"

"I suppose one of your slick friends or Iris or someone like that would just have been able to wind him around her finger, no matter how obnoxious he was."

"Now cut it out, Del. You're just working——"

"I suppose if he'd kept digging and digging at *them* about what they do—they must do *something*, they must want *something*, they must have *some* great big wonderful goal in life—they would have been able to give him an answer and that would have been the end of it."

"Look. Del. Will you please——?"

"And just because I don't have an answer to a question like that, I suppose I'm more of an immature idiot than ever. And then because I got panicky and disgraced you in front of all your chi-chi friends and proved I was completely out of place——"

"Del, for God's sake, will you stop——?"

"L-look, maybe it's good the whole damned thing happened. Maybe it proves that everything between us is a mistake." She slammed her glass down on the coffee table, so hard that the drink sloshed over, and darted over to pick up her coat.

He went after her and took her arm. "Where are you going? Calm down. Please. Why don't you just——?"

"Let me go. I want to go."

"No, Del dear, not until——"

"Let me go."

She raked his hand with her nails. It hurt, and he released her. She went out the door with her coat still over her arm and he heard her light feet pattering down the stairs.

He didn't call after her. He closed the door quietly. There were three red scratches on his hand.

He had only a sandwich and coffee for dinner that night and went to a movie, a musical comedy in colour which distracted him. But suddenly, while the chorus was circling

in a pinwheel, he felt himself become furiously angry, enraged to the point where he almost stood up in the mezzanine and shouted above the cheery lyrics. The damned, undisciplined, childish, mean little fool. Selfish and puling. Trouble-making and ill-bred. Self-consciously sensitive. The hell with her.

He folded his arms swiftly over his chest as if to restrain himself, and hugged tightly. In all the misery of the afternoon he had only inclined to her will (her whim) and later had tried only to pacify her when she had become hysterical. Now he wished he had slapped her. He imagined himself slapping her, and enjoyed it. He enjoyed the astonishment on her face when she saw that her too-too delicate soul was no licence to behave as she pleased, that her coy, frightened-fawn, airy-fairy spirit was no permit to disregard simple manners. He ought to have slapped her. Maybe it would have freed him.

He thought of how his mother would have treated Del's behaviour at Carter's; or any of his mother's friends, even those his age. Or even Iris.

Then he knew he didn't want to be free. For when he pictured his mother's unruffled, sympathetic dismissal or Iris's barely amused superciliousness, he immediately became defensive of Del. In his mind he sprang to her side and faced the others with her. He enjoyed that much more than slapping her. At any rate the slapping was their own affair, and had nothing to do with his mother or the Irises or Fowlers. Or the world.

He didn't want to be free of the trouble of loving Del; he didn't want to be spared swift expeditions into territories he would never otherwise have entered. He was conscious of these shadowy new lands, anticipated but not clearly imagined, settling themselves around him, waiting, like a pride of patient, powerful lions. He realized that he ought to be wary and slow; but then he thought of Del's close, close face and he touched the three scratches; and in his innermost core, he felt love.

Today was not yesterday between them, and tomorrow

would be further on. The philosophers, he remembered, tell us that there is no present, time moves constantly and "now" does not exist. Nor is there a "now" between two people, he thought. Always change, either for growth or dissolution. Today in its painful way had brought them closer. For under his anger (so quickly spent) and his defence were the bonds of perception; he knew why she had burst out in his apartment.

Sleep was calm for him that night, extraordinarily restful, with a feeling of clarification and quiet ascent. He telephoned her next morning about ten and said that she had forgotten her bag. He could bring it over, but he would rather have her come to his place for lunch. She accepted at once. Her voice sounded contrite and washed, rather small

Part Three

We are not lost but only run away,
The authors and the powers of confusion;
We are the promise of unborn occasions.

W. H. AUDEN.

[I]

NICK was the first to wake. He turned, brushed the hair off her cheek, and kissed her. "Happy Three Days Before Christmas," he said.

She squinted. "Thanks." She closed her eyes. "What time is it?"

He focused on the electric clock on his night-table. "Forgot to set the alarm, I guess. Almost half-past eight."

Her eyes popped open. "Cripes! I'll be late." She sat bolt upright, then put her hand to her head. "Damn it. I hate to wake up fast."

"You've got loads of time. You dress, and I'll get breakfast."

She swung out of bed, put on the robe he had bought for her and hurried into the bathroom; he went into the kitchen, heated the water for coffee and squeezed the oranges. It made him feel a little like an Asian peasant with a bamboo plough when he squeezed oranges instead of using frozen juice, but he enjoyed the relative primitiveness and certainly thought the juice was better. He took a glass of juice in to her.

"Thanks," she said.

He undid her robe and slipped his arms around her. He held her close and nibbled on her neck.

"No tricks, buster," she whispered. "I'm late, as it is."

He kissed her cheek noisily, then went back to the kitchen and boiled some eggs. It was a cosy feeling to make breakfast for the two of them, much more intimate than it had ever seemed with Iris. But then everything between them was more

intense than he had known it before, from sex to breakfast. In the five or six weeks since the week-end at Carter's, the tempo of his life had quickened: their decision to look forward to marriage (they both hated the word "engaged") and his settling with Itis about a divorce had seemed to put his life on oiled rails. Every pleasure in his life, large and small, had become more vivid—pleasures like working in his studio with her, walking with her, going to galleries and museums and theatres together. It was as if the appropriate nerves had been further exposed.

Other nerves had been quickened, too, he knew. Inevitably. Where formerly there would have been differences of a moment between them, there were instead sharp quarrels—brief but keen—delineated more painfully by being enclosed in love. The worst of them, the quarrel about the buttons, had brought them to bed together for the first time.

He mentioned it at breakfast.

"Eggs done all right?" he asked as she broke them into her cup.

"Perfect. It's disgusting. You do everything so——" She broke off and blushed.

"Lovely weather this morning."

"You rat. You're a rat. You know that, don't you?"

He put his hand on hers. "Del. Are you happy? You're happy, aren't you? I mean, at least, for God's sake, happiness has a chance of winning out?"

"It's a tussle, buster. I'm trying to hold out against it. But I love you, you see. I do love you," she said, looking up at him fully.

He wanted to go around the table and grab her, but he said, "No. Your eggs will get cold."

"My practical one."

"Del, let me say just one thing. I can't help marvelling how—when it happened—you just began sort of accepting it."

"*Lovely* weather this morning."

"I mean it. Really astounding."

She shrugged. "I-it's just part of life, isn't it?"

"Are all women like that? They just sort of move on to Stage Two? Or are you especially wonderful?"

"I'm glad you asked that question," she said in mock-lecturer fashion. Then she said, "What did you expect—chimes? Maidenly shrieks?"

"I don't know. I suppose there's still a naïve streak in me. I guess there is in all men on this subject. It has nothing to do with age—women are born more mature. About this, anyway."

"Maybe that's because they watch the man approaching, instead of vice versa."

"Maybe so. Maybe that's it." He sighed. "Anyway, God bless those buttons."

She chuckled. "Pretty scurvy trick. You probably planned the whole thing."

"No. It was worth it, as it happened, but I didn't like those two days."

She put down her cup. "I wish I could say th-that nothing like that will ever happen again."

"Well," he said, "Ecclesiastes says the safest thing is to be dead."

"Sometimes."

"Oh, for crying out tears. It's a sunny morning. The eggs are perfect. So was the night. Haul down the crepe."

"I'm sorry. I just love you so much and I know me so well, I can't help being nervous." She looked at the kitchen clock. "Wow."

He helped her into her coat and she said, "I wish I didn't have to get to the office till ten."

"That's because you're a low manual worker and I'm a thinker."

"Well, thinker, are you coming over for dinner tomorrow night?"

"As arranged. I don't know what time the office party will be over, but I should be down about seven."

"Good-o."

"Del . . . What does Myrna think? About . . . your not being home."

"I don't know. She would never say. I never make any comments about her, or vice versa. Beside, she likes you."

"A connoisseur, that girl. Well, hon," he said piously, "have a good day at the office."

She kissed him powerfully and long. Then she went.

He watched her cross the street, hurrying with her usual swift, smooth motion. (He had told her once that if she wore hoop skirts, people would think she was on skates.) He saw the corner of her coat swirl and disappear. It was the coat that had lacked the buttons.

Lunch, on the day after the flight from Carter's, began with muted strings, as it were. They were themselves with the volume turned down. They asked each other how they felt and they agreed on what to make for lunch and what records to put on the player. It was raining and they both felt like hearing an early Beethoven quartet.

The rain prompted the first mention of the day before. "I suppose it wouldn't have been much fun in the country today, anyway," Nick said.

"Nick," she said, "I phoned Carter. Just before I came here."

"Oh?"

"To apologize."

"Oh. Well." He was surprised: not that she had had the impulse but that she had been able to do it.

"The reason I did it—I mean, the special reason—was because he's your friend. I—I thought I owed it to you. And I—well, *you* would have phoned him. In my place."

He pretended that the fire needed fixing. "What did he say?"

"Carter really is wonderful. All he said was how he doesn't know how I stood it as long as I did and he was sending me Oscar's ears by special delivery. He said he couldn't apologize

to me for Oscar because his aunt taught him never to apologize for one guest to another, but if he didn't love his aunt, he would apologize. Carter is really pretty special."

"I've always liked him. I like him a lot more now."

"Nick. Shall I apologize to you?"

He looked at her, his eyes troubled and moist. "No. Please don't."

"I will. I will. I'll do anything you say. Only Nick—you see—it wouldn't do much good. I—I couldn't promise it would never happen again. Jesus, I'm not proud of being a jerk, I—I just couldn't promise I wouldn't be a jerk again."

"I know."

"Hmmm?"

"I wouldn't have said jerk," he said tentatively, "but I know you are what you are. And I know more of what you are than ever before. That's good and that's scary."

"Then what's the point of our—our——"

"Because I think it would be even more difficult to live without each other." He went over and sat next to her and took her hand. "Dearest, you behaved very badly yesterday. I don't know whether I was angrier at you or Fowler. But I—well, I did a lot of thinking—and I know I'm saying it all wrong, but I have the feeling I've seen the worst and well, O.K., then—that's the worst. I found out something last night. I want to be with you through the best and I can stand being with you through the worst."

"What are you saying, Nick?"

"I'm saying that when I was furious with you after you ran out of here—right when I wanted to choke you—I knew I loved you. Because I *know* you, and I can't help loving what I know about you. The dumb, troublesome things as well as the rest."

"Oh, Nick, there's just——"

"Wait. I'm not through. I want to write to Iris about a divorce. When it comes through, I want to marry you."

She put her free hand to her temple and pushed her hair up.

"I—I'm feeling so many things. I don't know what to say first."

"Take your time. Then answer yes."

"You know I want to. Dearest. B-but there are *some* things I have to say before that. Maybe it's just stupid pride, but there are some things about you."

"Of course. There must be."

"I mean, first, there's—don't be mad at me for saying this, darling, you know how I *feel*—but there's the fact that you let me go away and that you waited. I mean, I meant it when I was scared back there in L.A., and you had every reason to move slow, your reasons about me and your reasons about yourself, but you did move slow. I have to think of that."

"I hadn't considered that. It's true."

"It's not just stupid pride."

"I know that."

"Or that you judged me. Everybody judges, whether they know it or not. But I—I've always had the feeling of the—the yardstick."

"I've tried not to be poppa."

"I know you have, dearest." She squeezed his hand tightly. "But you were watching and waiting. You see, sweetest dearest, in your own way you're an egotist. It was me coming to you—whether I could make it. That's what you were waiting for."

Great God, he thought, feeling as if he had run headlong into a mirror, true, true, true. Oh, what some power the gift give us to see ourselves as loved ones see us. Oh, no. It would be too humiliating, too confidence-shattering. We couldn't stand making the allowances for ourselves that they make for us.

The fact that she had had this feeling and been patient with it, while he thought he was being patient with her, made him love her all the more.

"It's true," he said. "It's nice and subtly horrible, but it's true."

"No, dearest, it's just you. Part of the whole thing of you and me."

"Not any more. I found that out last night. We meet. We move toward each other. We join."

"But there's still so much that hasn't met, that may never meet. Things maybe we shouldn't even talk about—at least not yet. So much in me that you call troublesome; and in you that makes me scared, makes me act crazy. I—I can't promise you that that's all over."

"I know you can't. I'm not asking it. But what it all comes down to is, there was a sort of seed in each of us; and it's grown, not withered. That's all."

She smiled, softly, almost shyly. "Gee, it—it's not the way I imagined it. When I was a kid, I thought that when I was asked and I said yes—and you know I'll say yes—it would be absolutely safe and sure, one hundred per cent. It's not. You know that for yourself. But it's still yes."

They were quiet for a moment while the music played. Then he swallowed. "Well, girly," he said, "how's about a kiss?"

For a few weeks they had a happiness that seemed to Nick made of delicate small silver links, each day forging one exquisitely and binding them closer. They had agreed to keep their agreement a secret to avoid scrutiny and responsibility to anyone but themselves. They lived in the heart of their secret with warmth and a gleeful feeling of conspiracy.

It was difficult for him not to tap the sexual richness between them. The chief deterrent was her willingness to be guided by him. It was another responsibility, and he thought he would let just a little more time bloom between them, a kind of insurance, before he let them take this next step. Besides, for all her fire and her electric body, he knew that the shadow of her mother still hovered. She had said to him once sadly, "I'm sure my mother assumes we're having an affaire. I've never even been able to write anything to deny it—it would only make it worse." He sensed that there was an inner struggle going on; and the moment was not yet.

Then came the matter of the buttons. They had had a couple of quarrels before that, about trifles. For instance, she had got extremely angry at his long face when she said she liked Van Gogh. And he had the feeling that, even as she stung him into reply and the brief, hot battle was joined, that it was happening because they were closer together: that she felt more vulnerable and he more edgy. Then one evening, he had called to take her to dinner at Carter's, and on the way out he had noticed that two buttons were missing from her coat. He mentioned it discreetly and she confessed that she had lost them. He suggested that they stop at a tailor's to have them replaced. She said he was being a fuss-budget and he said it was nothing of the kind; it was a matter of taste and pride, not convention. As they argued, he felt more and more guiltily stuffy and righteous, she sounded more and more sillily Bohemian. They decided to abandon the evening, and he went home and telephoned Carter to say that Del was ill, that he thought he'd better stay with her. (Carter said, "I am the Original Jinx for you two. But come next Wednesday, anyway.")

Next day Nick was forlorn. He couldn't phone her at the office because she couldn't really talk there; and for two evenings she wouldn't answer the phone at home. He became embarrassed at Myrna's embarrassment in making excuses. The next evening he determined to charge into the apartment and, if Myrna were there, to drag Del out by the hair to some place where he could talk to her. However, Myrna was out, and the first thing Del said was, "You look rumpled." He almost had to force his way in, but then they talked. They talked and kissed. Then they went to a quiet bar and got quietly tight. She came home with him and they lay down together on the huge sofa before the fireplace.

"Darling, darling," she murmured as they kissed, "I shouldn't have let you come back. We have so much trouble . . ."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said. "Everyone has fights. But not everyone is us. We can't stop because of a silly fight."

"Oh, dearest . . ."

Then later, warmed by the whisky and the added heat of reunion, he uncovered her bosom (only the second time since he had known her) and was kissing her moon-white, petal-tipped breasts when suddenly her whole body arched and she gave a short, hopeless cry and pulled his head up by the hair and fastened her lips envelopingly on his; he knew why the cry had been hopeless, that she had surrendered, that he was forced to accept the surrender or, paradoxically, betray her. . . .

The nights they had spent together had been revelations to Nick although he was of course the more experienced. He had had a modest number of affairs before marriage and had been married (faithfully) for three years to an exquisite woman; but he had never before had the sensation of falling headlong into a beautiful fire, of being consumed by flame and at the same time feeding the flame to prolong the delight and torment. Their rightness together, from the first, set a seal on his love, a testament that his response to her from their earliest meeting had been rooted deep in his being. Del, after they made love, seemed to return; as if she had been on an excursion of abandonment and was now ready to resume life. Her assumption that sex was so complete a release for everyone, he could ascribe to her inexperience; but her calm resumption of ordinary matters, her implication of "I was a virgin and now I'm not, and what has that to do with the *real* facts of life?"—this struck him as marvellously touching and made a kind of awe in him.

They saw each other at least twice during each week and always on week-ends, but she had spent the night at his place only four times. It was as if they were playing a game with each other, pretending that they were not physical lovers except at the very times they were in bed together. ~~J.~~ gave him the feeling that she wanted to keep them two people; in love but still two people, not a pair. He rather liked this; it eliminated any taking of things for granted, each time they had to deserve each other afresh.

He had written to Iris about the divorce and she had agreed with the mild acquiescence that had characterized the last months of their marriage. He said nothing about Del to her, relying on her lack of interest in him and a certain sense of chic, of suitable arrangements in lives as well as homes. After she had agreed and he had consulted a lawyer and learned more about California's community-property laws, he knew she had still another reason.

It was odd. He remembered so little about Iris personally. The thing he seemed to remember best was the look of her clothes lying on chairs in the bedroom.

After Del and I are married, he thought, if ever we have to get divorced, it sure won't be casual. There'll have been a good deal more of ~~up-~~married to each other than was ever true with Iris. That's because there's more of me than there used to be. She's opened it up.

I used not to be so introspective, he thought. I almost never thought about what I was or why. Bless my soul, I've become the jolly Hamlet of Charles Street.

He glanced at his watch and bade a hasty adieu to Elsinore.

The first order of business that day was to dictate letters of thanks to the two professors of the Columbia Faculty of Medicine who had helped him with his research for the typewriter and comptometer keyboards—an oculist and a neurologist who had confirmed and revised his ideas about visual and manual efficiency. Just as he was about to go down the hall to the workshop, Eve Reynolds telephoned.

"I know I'm interruptin', because you're always busy."

"Sure. Think this is public relations? This is work."

"Well, I'd try to talk fast, honey, but you know how hard it is for me."

"Don't rush. Take two minutes. How are you?"

"Just fine. And your own self?"

"Let me see . . . Pretty good, I guess."

"Good enough to come to a party? Been thinking it's

almost a month since I saw you last and I thought you might like to come on over here to our Christmas party tomorrow afternoon."

"Oh, Eve, that's very nice of you. I would like to come very much, but tomorrow is our own party and I don't think I can manage to break away early."

"Shucks. Afraid it might be."

"But we certainly ought to see each other around Christmas, to wish each other merriness and all. Are you busy for lunch on Friday?"

"No, I'm not, Nick."

"Well, please have it with me."

"I'd admire to, very much."

"Good. I'll meet you at Julio's at twelve-thirty."

"Perfect. That's what I call a good trade. I call you up with an invite and instead I get one myself."

"Well, that's the risk you've got to run, Eve. When you talk to people, you have to expect you're going to make them lonesome for you."

"Honey, you be there at twelve-thirty sharp. That's all I got to say to *you*."

That afternoon George LoPresto's magazine was having its party, and George had invited Nick to come down. He had agreed to drop by for a drink; he was grateful to George because, for whatever motive, he had initiated Parlier's hiring him.

The magazine office was a beautifully decorated suite in a shabby loft building on East Twenty-first Street. Nick took one of the ready-made Martinis and a *canapé* of what could not possibly have been caviare and made his way round the crowded room, exchanging unheard remarks with a lot of people he knew, some of whom he liked. At last George, who had been busy with men whose tanned, creased faces spelled West, broke loose from them on a wave of throaty, gold-toothed laughter and came over to Nick.

"Hiya, feller," he said.

"George. How goes it?"

"Well, like the fat girl said, I manage to make ends meet. Glad you could come, Nick. How are things in your shop?"

"I like it, George, very much. Parlier is a stimulating man, he's given me an interesting job and good assistants, and he's left me pretty much alone to wrestle with things. You did me a good turn when you put me on to this."

George reddened, as he always did either with praise or contradiction, and put his arm around Nick. "Hell, boy," he said in his squeaky voice, "like helps like. It's time for the good men to stand together against the slobs. I keep hearing the scuttlebutt about you, Nick. I hear you've got this type-writer thing in the palm of your hand."

"Well, I'm enjoying it very much. Let's say that."

George patted his shoulder. "I hear more too. About Ferdy."

"Oh, really?"

"I hear Peerless could be happier about him."

"Mmm. I ran into Ferdy a couple of months ago. He indicated that all was not roses."

"And it hasn't got any better. I had lunch last week with Arnold—he's the new assistant to Buchanan at Peerless. You know what he asked me?"

He waited for Nick to say "No." "No," said Nick.

"He asked me where you were and what you were doing. He wanted to know whether you were back in town."

"That's nice. But I'm a happy man."

"Revenge is sweet, Nick."

Nick stared at him. The cliché was the simplest truest thing this man had ever said to him. "Yes," he replied with quiet realization; "it is."

"You may hear from Buchanan one of these days, feller."

"It'll be nice to talk to him again. But I'm a happy man."

LoPresto didn't waste time. Shortly before noon the next day Nick picked up his phone and, after the secretary's

introduction, heard the familiar country storekeeper's drawl. "Nick? This is Jess. Jess Buchanan."

"Well, Jess. How are you?" He had no affection for this man, but neither had he any antipathy. Buchanan had owed him no special loyalty; their relationship had been cash-and-carry.

"Oh, tolerable, I guess, Nick, for a country boy adrift in a big city. How's your good self?"

"Excellent, thanks."

"Glad to hear it. Fellow works here—Ned Arnold—you know Ned?"

"No. I don't think I do."

"No. I guess Ned came in only about a year ago. Well, anyway. Ned tells me he saw George LoPresto and George told him you'd been back in town a few months. Why'n't you give a feller a ring?"

Nick knew that under that bucolic homeliness there was one of the shrewdest, most ruthless business minds he had ever met; so he enjoyed this little folksy radio play. "Oh, you know how it is, Jess. Been busy settling myself in a new job."

"Of course, of course. But I don't know, it occurred to me, Nick, that as long as you *are* in town, it'd be a shame to let the Yuletide season pass without lifting the cup that cheers. Why don't we have a glass of grog together soon and shoot the breeze? Just for fun and old times' sake."

Old times, thought Nick, were the days when I was thrown out. "All right, Jess. But it will have to be next week."

"Suits me fine. Oh, Nick," he said as if this had just occurred to him. "people being what they are, being so quick to make something out o' what they see, maybe we'd better not have that drink any place out in public. Surprising how many people see you no matter where you go."

"Whatever you say. I don't care."

"Why don't you come on up to my place? I've got some twenty-year-old Scotch I'm kind of proud of."

Revenge is sweet, saith LoPresto. "Well, matter of fact, Jess,

I've got some pretty good Scotch myself. And I'd like you to see my new apartment."

Buchanan hesitated not a second; he was always ready for anything. "Why, that's kind of you, Nick. Sure," said the Vice-President in charge of sales and promotion, a man with three secretaries, two assistants and a staff of two hundred people, a man whose private office was only a little less inaccessible than the White House, "I'd love to come down."

Nick gave him the address. "How about Monday at six?"

"Couldn't be better. Nice to talk to you, Nick."

Nick said, "The feeling's mutual, Jess."

[2]

NEXT day at the Christmas party Parlier put his arm around Nick's shoulders and drew him into a corner. "So," he said. "Having fun?"

Nick lifted his champagne glass. "It makes pleasure to me, it makes happy, of a certainty."

"Such English," said Parlier. "You sound like a—foreigner."

It was the best office party Nick had ever attended. Most such parties had been as tawdry as LoPresto's yesterday: whisky in paper cups or at best a bar that dispensed ready-made highballs, Martinis and Manhattans. But Parlier Associates had decorated the large conference room with Christmas garlands and had brought in two red-jacketed waiters who served nothing but good champagne in appropriate glasses. At a portable electric grill a white-hatted chef produced endless *shish kebab*; there was not a *canapé* to be seen.

"Listen," said Parlier, "I had this morning a call from Jacobson." He was the production manager of the typewriter company. "They will have the mock-ups built by next week. He's coming down to New York with them."

"That's quick enough. How does he sound?"

"Oh, pretty happy. This is an old man, of course, and he still thinks design is a lot of powder-puff nonsense, they ought to leave it to the engineers, thinks this one, and then get someone in later to paint some roses on the outside. But so far as this type can be happy, he is in ecstasy."

"Good."

"
In the light of yesterday's call from Buchanan, Parlier and his office looked even pleasanter than usual to Nick. To be esteemed and sought after was not new in his professional life, but it was unfailingly delectable. In addition, Parlier had presented him with a bonus that morning, quite adequate in view of his short tenure.

"Good," he repeated.

"What are you doing New Year's Eve?"

"Hmm?"

"You ever been to my apartment?"

"No."

"The most beautiful in New York. I promise you. Got a date New Year's Eve?"

"Nothing definite."

"I am making a great party. Marvellous. A huge party for a few people. You come. If your wife is here, bring your wife."

"She's still out West."

"You want a girl? I know two just quit the Copa. Strictly for connoisseurs. You want a phone number?"

"Thanks, Guy, I've got a phone number. I'd love to come to your party."

"Excellent. Be there by eleven-thirty. All right?"

"Fine."

"Oh, by the way, we're dressing. Makes everyone more gay, more alert, no?"

To keep his dinner date with Del and Myrna, Nick broke away about quarter to seven, although the party was still pulsing vigorously. He had enjoyed talking to some of the people in distant offices and departments who had merely been faces to him, and he had concluded by kissing his secretary, Mrs. Reid, before a cheering group of spectators.

"Harvard man, Harvard man," crowed Parlier. "Put on your gloves first."

Nick liked the feeling of being a bit more than slightly tight, of striding imperially out of the building (where was the

sidewalk?) and flinging into a cab—of riding triumphantly downtown through the dark, full of secret chuckles and ascendancy, toward dinner with his beloved. The narrow doorway on Thirteenth Street seemed beautiful and particularly his. Still feeling gigantic with champagne, he went up the long stairs, and Myrna appeared on the landing.

"Del!" he exclaimed. "How you've improved!"

Myrna gave him her large, homely, heart-warming smile and said, "I'll tell her. Aha! We have been looking on the wine when it was red."

"Pale yellow, pal," he said panting, "and very chill." He pulled her to him and kissed her soundly. "I don't know," he said. "I seem to be irresistible tonight."

She blushed furiously and said, "I don't notice anything different. Now come on in before things get indecent."

She led him into the apartment, where Gene, the shabby Apollo, was sitting on the sofa with a plate of food. "'O, 'ick," he said with a full mouth.

"'O, 'ene," said Nick, and Gene almost choked. Del was busy in the kitchenette. "Ah, there's our daisy."

She had on an apron and was fussing with the oven. "Late, late, late. Here I've been hanging over a hot stove all day—half an hour, anyway, and——" She kissed his cheek. "And reeking of alcohol, too."

"Listen, battle-axe. There was plenty dames, plenty, willing to take me home to dinner from that party. So you better appreciate."

"So am I warming up your dinner or not?"

"What is it?"

"Tamale pie."

Nick pursed his lips. "If you say so."

"Nick," said Myrna, "I'm terribly sorry, but Gene and I had to begin without you. Gene's got a date to play in New Jersey and we have to get started."

"But——" He looked at Del. "Didn't you tell them? My surprise?"

"She told us you were going to make a dessert," Myrna said. "Gee, I'm sorry."

"And it has to be made fresh and eaten warm," he said. "Very well, you don't escape. I'll make yours and Gene's before I begin my own dinner."

"Oh, Nick——"

"Say no more." To Del: "Madam, the ingredients."

She brought out the eggs and sugar and sherry. "Will that be all, Professor?"

"Saucepan and double boiler, please." She placed them on the stove.

"What's it going to be, 'Nick?" called Gene from the sofa.

"*Zabaglione*. Like you have never eaten. Are you ready for it?" They were. "Presto."

"But what about yours?" asked Myrna. "If it has to be warm."

"I'll make mine and Del's later."

"Pardon me, honey," said Del, "but are you sober enough to drive?"

He looked at Myrna and nodded sidewise at Del. "Who's your friend?" He picked up an egg. "*Alors!*" The wine still tingling through his body made him especially sure-fingered and competent. He separated out three yolks and beat a little sugar into them. He beat the whites almost, but not quite, stiff. Then, using an eggshell as a measuring cup, he put three half-shells of sherry in the saucepan and warmed it slightly. Then he beat the warm sherry into the yolks on top of the just-warm double boiler. "This is the tricky part. One false move and all you've got is scrambled eggs."

"Quiet, *everyone!*" yelled Del.

After a few minutes of stirring he lifted the double boiler from the flame and swiftly stirred in the whites. Then he said, "Ah," and poured the dessert into two wine glasses. "Eat, eat, *mes enfants*."

Myrna said, "Gorgeous." Gene said, "Boy! Beats custard," and Nick clapped his forehead.

"It is what I might have expected. The only surprise is that you had a bottle of sherry in this Philistine den."

"And the only reason we had it," said Myrna, "is because my aunt came to see us and all she drinks is sherry."

"That reminds me," said Nick to Del. "I had a cable yesterday. The Mater approaches."

"Really? From jolly old England?"

"Flying in this week-end."

"But I thought they spend the winter on the Riviera and in Italy."

"Too many Americans in Cannes and Rome these days, it seems. Anyway, they've been invited to spend the winter with some friends in Palm Beach."

"Spend the *winter*?" said Gene. "Man, that's the kind of friends to have."

Nick was a bit uncomfortable, as always, about discussing his mother's set: but he had to follow through. "They're a mad lot, all right. Mother is the only human being I know who begins a cable with 'Darling.'"

"But won't there be three or four Americans in Palm Beach?" asked Del.

"That's different. That's where they belong. Besides Lyon has never seen Palm Beach."

"Lyon?"

"Her husband. Pronounced Lahn."

"Boy, what a crazy, mixed-up family," said Gene.

"It should happen to you," said Myrna.

"No, it shouldn't," said Nick.

Soon Myrna and Gene had finished their desserts and gulped their coffee. They put on their coats (Gene wore a shapeless tweed and a scuffed derby), thanked Nick and excused themselves. The clonk of the door behind them nicely closed out the world; the room blossomed with privacy.

"At last," said Del. She threw her arms around him and kissed him warmly, hungrily. "God, I could hardly wait."

In a moment he said, "Well, thanks, ma'am. But what's so special about tonight?"

She rubbed her cheek against his. "I don't know, from the moment you walked in, you looked so cute, so tight and gay, and then y-you go right ahead and make that delicious thing. You're so clever. You're so cute. I could hardly wait."

"I'm yours."

They kissed again, embracing tightly there in the kitchenette, their bodies close and conscious, and he brought his hand up and caressed her bosom.

Then he pulled back his head and looked at her. "Tell you something, pal old pal. I'm glad to see you."

"Humph," she murmured, breathing deeply under his hand. Then she said, "Tamale pie."

"Really? I thought it was——"

She slapped his hand off and turned to the oven. "I hope it's not burned. No. Just great." She drew out the casserole dish. "Prepare, laddie. Yum-yum."

They sat on the sofa, dishes on their laps, knees touching, and ate their tamale pie, which was precisely the sort of dish one could expect from working girls who do their own cooking. "Del, do you want to meet the Mother while she's here?"

"I'd sure love to see her. But I'm not so anxious to have her see me. Couldn't I sort of observe her through a one-way window?"

"Not handily. But there's no reason why you have to meet her—right now, anyway."

"Wouldn't it sort of be like a—a public announcement? Just what we want to avoid for a while?"

"Yes, unless I can fix it up sort of obliquely. Maybe she and Lyon can come down to a small party. We'll see."

"Does she know about Iris?"

"Yes; it didn't bother her. She expects people to have marital troubles, like colds. After all, Lyon is her third husband."

"Third. I didn't know that."

"My father and the second didn't last long. Besides—though she admired Iris the way she would a Paris gown—Mother never thought she was worthy of me."

"That's the occupational disease of mothers."

"Yes; but this is something else. Stupid stuff about family." He went on quickly. "Say, I got a bonus today."

"Well, you clever thing."

"Every bit helps. Martin Miller—my lawyer—says there's a very good chance that Iris can really take me to the cleaners." He patted her hand with heavy patronization. "But don't feel bad, pal old pal. It's not your fault, specially. It would be expensive no matter who I was divorcing her for."

She shrugged. "So what? So you'll appreciate me more."

"I *knew* the money wouldn't mean anything to you. It never does. You never think about it or talk about it or worry about it. You're the stupidest girl I ever met. You never even asked me whether I'm rich."

"Millions wouldn't make you less repulsive."

"How do you know I'm *not* rich?"

"Y-you can't scare me. I don't care if you are or not. Money is something people are always complaining about running out of, but they never actually do. Not really. Anyway, I've got my own troubles, let other people have money troubles. *Are* you rich?"

"Nope. I inherited twenty-five thousand dollars on my twenty-fifth birthday——"

"From your father?"

"No," he said scoffingly. "I told you my father cleared out when I was a baby. He's in oil somewhere down in Venezuela. I've never even had a letter from him. No; the money came from my mother's father. And there'll be more from the estate, eventually, I suppose. But I'm not rich. I earn my living. And I'll really have to steer between the rocks for a while after the divorce."

She chewed. "You know, Kenneth suspects we're, shall I say, going steady. Or steadier."

"Oh? How?"

"Because I won't go out with him any more except for lunch."

"And—um—does he approve? Of us?"

"Of course not. He's like your mother, he thinks you're much too good for me. Honest. He said that."

"Very sensible. Unless he means that you're only good enough for him."

"Oh, I—I don't think Kenneth's really serious about me. Oh, h-he knows we like each other, but he can see there just —isn't room for him, I suppose."

Nick could easily envisage a set of circumstances in which he did not exist and in which Del and Kenneth could have met and fallen in love and probably been reasonably happy together. This picture did not make him jealous; it made him sympathetic to Kenneth, and admiring. But he didn't say any of this to Del—largely because he knew she knew it. "I like Kenneth."

"So do I."

"But I don't want to talk about him. I want to boast a little. You remember the business about Ferdy Bates?" He told her about LoPresto and about Buchanan's call.

She shook her head slightly. "I told you you were a dreamy designer. Everybody thinks so."

"Granted, granted. The mills of the gods, eh, pal?"

"Gee, this sure puts you in a funny position, doesn't it?"

"Why? Why funny?"

"I don't know, wouldn't you sort of have to . . . Well, it probably doesn't matter, anyway. You don't want to leave Parlier, do you?"

"Not especially. But I don't see why it's a funny position."

"Oh, I don't know. Anyway, I thought if you did move—anyway, it doesn't matter. Since you're staying where you are." She glanced at his place. "More tamale pie?"

"No, thanks." He decided not to pursue the dropped subject, but he wondered why she had been so quick to

believe that he would stay at Parlier. And although he was happy there, he wondered why he had replied so quickly that he didn't care to leave. Was it just because he had anticipated that it was the reply she wanted? He could think of several reasons for returning to Peerless, beside the personal gratification. First, whatever he achieved in his present job would always be credited to Parlier Associates; after, say, twenty years of hard, good work, only a small circle would know his name. If he went back with Peerless, it would be with a contract for an independent office headed by himself. Second, he wouldn't change jobs except for more money, a good deal more than Parlier was paying him and a great deal more than Peerless had paid him; and money was going to be most welcome if Iris was awarded the settlement that she might very well get. He wished he hadn't said "not especially" just now. Not quite so quickly.

"It was delicious," he said. "But I've had plenty."

"You didn't really like it."

"Sure I did. But I'm full of *shish-kebab*."

"So I've been told."

"No, really, they had a chef making it at the party. Oh, good grief, I almost forgot. Parlier invited me to a New Year's Eve party at his place. Will you come?"

"Oh. Very grand?"

"*Very* grand. You'll have to wear an evening gown."

"That settles that."

"No, it doesn't. Santa may remember it a day or two after Christmas." He quieted her incipient protest. "So shut up about it. Will you come?"

"All right." She kissed him. "I also want my *zabaglione*."

"But directly, madam."

He went over to the kitchenette and began to prepare it. She lounged on the sofa and turned on the radio and smoked. "You're not the only one," she said.

"The only one who what, Mr. Bones?"

"Got offered another job. One of the assistants in the fiction

department is leaving—a junior junior editor—and Mrs Berger called me in today and said I could have it if I wanted it.”

He turned. “Well, for God’s sake! Don’t say anything about it, of course. Just sit there with it all bottled up inside you. Don’t let me in on it.”

She shrugged. “Oh, well——”

“Oh, well, oh, well, shrug, shrug, shrug.” He came back to her and grabbed her shoulders and smacked her brow with his lips. “My poil! Congratulations.”

“But, Nick, I—I haven’t told her I’d take it.”

“Playing it cagey?”

“No; I’m just not sure I want it.”

“Why in the world not? I know what your taste is like. The only trouble is, it may be too good for the magazine. Is that what you’re worried about?”

“No, I—I suppose as far as reading goes, I could do it all right. But there’s such a lot of, oh, chi-chi—one of the editors wears her hat in the office and a black ribbon choker—that kind of thing. And they’re always phoning people to have drinks. Especially with ‘gals,’ what they call ‘gals’—women writers and agents. All that lunching and cocktailing, that’s not my speed, kid.”

He sat next to her. “Del. This is important. The job itself doesn’t matter, the extra money—if there is any. But it’s important to you. It’s a step forward for *you*. That’s what I care about.”

“Dearest, I know you do. But why is it a step forward?”

“Because it’s a better job. Because you’re more—Del is more—than a secretary. I want you to be more.”

“Why can’t I do it just by being *me* more? What’s it got to do with jobs?”

“All right. Sure. You can. But a bigger job means exercising more muscles. Besides, it’s a kind of manifesto.”

“You mean it shows other people?”

“Certainly. You think that’s a small thing? That’s a very

big thing, honey babe. What we live amongst, in case you haven't noticed, is people—and it's very healthy to want people to think well of you."

"Not me. I—I don't care."

He paused. "O.K. What is it, then? Do you just want to go on doing what you're doing? Until we're married. You just want to stay in that niche?"

"Yes, Nick. Yes, exactly. Y—you don't know what a wonderful feeling it is for me to walk in there and have Mrs. Berger look at me with a *confident* look and have everything in my hot little hand and be good at it. It's been a bit of an uphill fight for our girl the last few years—and dearest, meeting you and falling in love with you and going through the last four months hasn't made it any easier. I've *got* this now, I've licked it, and when I close up at night, my desk is clean—absolutely clean—and everything I had to do is done and done damned well. I—I can't tell you, Nick, I——"

"But why couldn't that be true of the new job?"

She looked at her hands. "Maybe it could. I just don't want to try it just now. For a while I just want to be what I am now. I don't feel I have to keep climbing. That's it."

He got up and walked away with the odd feeling that on this subject, they were talking over one of those military scrambler telephones that wasn't functioning properly. When she had said that Buchanan's call put him in a funny position, he had felt a queer thrill of bewilderment but he had thought it premature and perhaps superfluous to explore it. However, this offer of hers seemed to lie right across their mutual path.

"You know what I feel?" he said. "I feel a little as if I'd been a failure with you. If there's one thing I wanted, besides having you to love, it was to help you. I guess I haven't succeeded."

"But Nick, that's just your yardstick again."

"I'm sorry, but if——"

"You have helped, dearest, the fact that you even looked at

me helped. But I—I can't be like you in everything. I don't want any kind of success, even this miserable little promotion. I just want to be me."

"And you think I don't understand that."

"I—I don't know."

"Dearest, I've tried to tell you: the only importance of this job to me is because it's more of you."

She shook her head. "We're not reaching. Nick," she said, "I don't want anything more. In a job."

"You don't want to take any more chances."

"Well, that's how it looks to you. And to me it looks as if you think living and growing and being yourself means what—what other people call making progress."

"Now I'm a huckster."

"No, dearest, of course not—there are a million reasons for wanting to 'progress.' It just happens none of them mean anything to me."

"All right. That's that, then. *Finito*. You're going to turn it down."

"I think so. I just wish I hadn't mentioned it. It's made a—a thing between us."

"Don't be silly," he said. She looked at him. In a moment he said, "It isn't as if you had to make a career. I'm hoping that soon you'll be out of all this job business anyway. It's irrelevant."

She looked at him, and they both knew that this was untrue, it was more than a matter of jobs.

Then she said, "Well, boy, back to the kitchen."

Later he sank back on the couch sipping coffee and smoking the cigar Parlier had given him while Del cleaned up in the kitchenette. There wasn't much to do and she wouldn't let him help. She and the sounds she was making at the other end of the large room seemed a continent away.

He looked behind him at the shelf of her books. Virginia Woolf, Faulkner's short stories, Katherine Anne Porter, Stephen Potter, some volumes of poetry. He picked up one

anthology. Written on the flyleaf was: "Delia Vanderhoff, Gunstock, Colorado. Summer (dated two years before). Mountains. Mountains." He riffled the pages and noted the poems she had marked. "I long to talk with some old lover's ghost" (that line was underscored), "Oh, wild West Wind," "anyone lived in a pretty how town."

He looked at her back, then looked again at the lines that had touched her, feeling as if he had shared the experience with her; but the pleasure of this was not enough to warm the atom of fear that was in him.

He had proposed marriage to Del because, in a sense, there simply was nothing else to do. It was the only possible course in their particular situation, the only dynamic. They loved each other. Del being herself, he being himself with his fastidiousness and sense of responsibility, he couldn't easily have asked her to embark on a consciously impermanent affair. And, despite their differences, he knew after all these months that they couldn't bear the wrench of parting, it would have been murderously cruel and pointless. Society left them no practical alternative but to move toward marriage.

But he had made one failure in marriage. He didn't want to make another. He didn't want to keep another divorce in the back of his mind as a refuge, an escape hatch. He thought of children.

He sipped the warm coffee and still felt the spot of cold in him.

Oh, nonsense. We love each other, it will work out, he thought. He looked up anxiously to see whether he had said it aloud.

Next day he found Eve sitting in a semicircular alcove at Julio's sipping a sazerac.

"What," he said after they greeted each other, "no Southern Comfort?"

"Just a little switch for the holidays, honey. We used to drink these down home this time of year."

He ordered a Scotch sour and she had another sazerac, and Christmas got its toast. She picked up a prettily wrapped tie box from the seat next to her and handed it to him. "Merry to you, honey."

"For heaven's sake. Thank you, Eve dear. Thank you very much." At first he felt embarrassed; then he said, "I don't have a gift for you, Evie, and you know, I'm glad. It makes this something special. Not just a trade."

She nodded. "That's a real sweet thing to say. You just leave it that way, Earlin'. Don't send me anything."

"All right. I promise."

He had a second drink with lunch and she had a third. Neither of them was going back to the office that afternoon—the day before Christmas—and they reclined in the luxury of the season.

"Eve," he said, feeling companionable and free, "you know a lot about me. Do you mind knowing a little more? In confidence?"

"Love knowin' about you, honey. Blessed be the tie that binds."

"You remember old Ferdy?"

"Mm-hm."

"I told you I'd heard that Peerless wasn't exactly ecstatic about him. Well, Buchanan, the V.P. in charge of sales, called me up this week. He wants to see me. What's more he's coming down to see me, Monday afternoon."

She looked at him steadily, with her generous grey eyes. "Honey, I don't wish anybody any hard luck. You know that."

"I do indeed."

"But I'm glad to hear this. There's so few messed-up things in this world that get put to rights. And it's always the nicest people that get the rawest deals. I'm glad this one is goin' to work out."

"Well, of course, I don't know precisely what he wants to talk about. And whatever it is, I certainly don't know whether

I'll accept. The only thing wrong with my present set-up is that I'm not running my own shop. But—well—I thought you'd be interested to hear."

"Honey, I feel like cheerin'. It's like in the fairy tales when the king finds out it was the woodcutter's son who killed the dragon, not the lyin' ol' sorcerer. It doesn't happen often. He comin' Monday?"

"Yes."

"Nick, I got no claim on it just because you told me this much. But if you feel like it, come up an' ha've dinner with me afterward and tell me what happened."

He hesitated. Of course he could go, but he was avoiding seeing other girls in private, no matter how merely friendly their relations, since he and Del had reached an agreement. He and she had never explicitly discussed it; it had been tacitly assumed that neither of them would have what might be called a "date." Besides, he knew that Eve and he were fond of each other and that he had better not put their relationship in a situation where it might wax.

"Well, I'll telephone you, Evie. I'm afraid I can't make it Monday."

"Oh, of course. Whatever suits you." She seemed to withdraw, as if he had made her realize she had been somewhat eager.

"Thanks, anyway. I'll certainly want to pho'c. I'll want you to know."

"Well, I'm going to be home. Maybe you can come over another night."

"Except next week—you know, New Year's and all that. Pretty frantic."

"Sure, honey. I'm going' to be busy too. I jus' thought we might find a night. But I understand."

The light in the alcove seemed to have grown a shade dimmer.

He wanted to enfold her. So often when he was with her, at lunch, in a theatre, he felt in her manner, in the soft way in

which she conveyed that she was with him alone, that she was enfolding him. Now he wanted to reciprocate.

He owed her an explanation, but how could he possibly broach the subject?

"What do you hear from Iris?" she asked.

"All good things. Her films swim along, and she's agreed to a divorce."

"Oh? I didn't know you were askin'."

Now, he thought. But easily. It's Eve. "Yes. There's . . . Well, I've asked her."

She looked at him, then she smiled without smiling, as if she were touching him gently. "Nick. You've got a girl."

Admiration and gratitude. Thank you, he thought. "Yes. I have." If Del knew all the circumstances, which it would be pointless to tell her, she would forgive this one breach of confidence.

"That's wonderful for you, Nick. I congratulate you."

"Thank you, dearest. It is wonderful, as a matter of fact. You've met her, Evie. She's——"

"The girl from California."

"Yes. That's right. How clever of you."

"It's not cleverness, honey. It's—well—no mind." Then she said, "All happiness, Nick. I really mean that, honey, and don't be angry with me if I say I don't want to hear any more about it. Not just now."

"All right, Evie. Whatever you say."

The grey eyes were on him, modest and proud.

I wish I had three or four lives, he thought. Not one after another—simultaneously.

"Eve," he said. "Evie. Will you let me see you once in a while? Like this?"

"Oh, surely, honey. I'm not all that big a fool. I'm not goin' to cheat myself out of knowin' you."

She added, "But don't call me for about a couple of weeks, will you, Nick?"

[3]

THE day after Christmas was New York winter weather at its worst. It was grey, dirty and cold; the air was filled with bits of blown newspaper and cheerlessness.

As he crossed the plaza to the Hotel Plaza, Nick felt almost abashed and apologetic, as if the city had let him down badly. He knew what his mother must be thinking as she looked out the window.

In the lobby he picked up a house telephone and asked for Mrs. St. Andrew. He pronounced the first syllable "Sint" in deference to Lyon, but it never occurred to Nick to ask for him.

"Yes," said his mother as if it was the middle of a conversation.

"Hello, Mother. I'm downstairs."

"Darling. How lovely. Come up at once." She gave him the room number.

In answer to his knock Lyon opened the door. "Hallo, old man. How nice to see you," Lyon said and shook hands. He was in his late fifties, about Nick's height, sandy-haired and quite spare. He had a small moustache, slightly flushed cheeks, and in his bony, leathery way he was entirely trim.

"Hello, Lyon. You're looking very fit."

"I feel fit, my dear Nick. Looking damned well yourself."

Nick's mother came out of the bedroom. She was shorter than Nick or Lyon; her hair was (no longer naturally) brown, her figure was (quite naturally) excellent, her face still

clean-lined and firm-chinned at sixty. She was wearing a smart grey suit with a small gold watch pinned to the lapel.

"My dearest boy," She spread her arms and they embraced. "My darling. Oh, it's so good to see you."

"And to see you, Mother." He kissed her cheek. "You look marvellous. How do you do it? You look absolutely marvellous."

"My sweet dear. I feel marvellous. Come sit down here and let me look at you and hold your hand. I've ordered tea and we'll just sit here together and wait for it." They sat on a love-seat and she cocked her head at him. "Oh, Marion dearest, you're getting to be such a man!"

"The fate of all of us boys, eh, Lyon?"

"Mm. Dare say."

"Lyon, isn't he getting such a wonderful mature look?"

"Quite. Looks a damned sight older than you or I."

Nick laughed. "Lyon hasn't changed a bit, I see."

"That has its advantages," said his mother, "though they are not limitless. How long is it since we saw each other, dearest? Ages, I know."

"Let's see, just after Uncle Perry's funeral. Over a year, I guess."

"Too long. Too, too long. We must never let that happen again."

"I agree."

"I don't suppose there's any chance of your getting down to Florida this 'winter.'"

"Not much, I'm afraid."

"Well, then, you must absolutely come up to the Cape next summer, for a good long rest. Mustn't he, Lyon?"

"Absolutely. Take him sailing."

"It's a date," said Nick. By then, he thought, perhaps you'll be taking both of us sailing. He had a vision of Del in the sun, in shorts, with the wind ruffling her short hair. Then he had a vision of Del with his mother. "How long are you staying here now?"

"We fly tomorrow morning," said his mother. "Or, more accurately, we flee."

"You always do seem to hit New York at its worst."

"Darling, it's not just the weather. Everything's going. This is the one city on earth where they tear down old things just to build new ones. No matter how lovely or useful the old ones still are. This is practically the last hotel left in New York, and I suppose it's doomed."

"I'm sorry you won't be staying at least a day or two. I was hoping you might come down to see my place tomorrow night. I thought I might have some friends in."

"Oh, darling, that sounds lovely. I should love to see your flat and I'm perishing of curiosity to meet the people you know these days. But I do hate to set foot below Fiftieth Street and we're expected at Consuelo's tomorrow for lunch."

"In Palm Beach?"

"Yes." She held his hand. "Don't think me a dreadful, neglectful mother, but if you only knew how New York affects me. I never feel I'm myself here. *Couldn't* you come along for a week or so? I know Consuelo would be delighted."

"I'm afraid not just now, Mother. I'm in the middle of things."

"Oh, yes, the new job. You must tell us all about it."

A waiter knocked, then wheeled in a cart on which were tea things and some small sandwiches.

"Thank you very much," said Mrs. St. Andrew. "Just put it here and I'll serve."

Lyon signed and tipped, and the waiter withdrew.

"Milk and one sugar, darling?" she asked.

"Half a sugar, please," said Nick. "Guarding the waist-line."

"Do have a sandwich," said Lyon, passing the plate. "Seem to be cucumber and—er—something else."

"I'll have the other."

"Must say you manage that tea like a curate," said Lyon. "I thought you Americans preferred Coco-cola."

"Oh, of course, but we know how to flatter foreigners."

"Now you two stop teasing," said Mrs. St. Andrew. "I want to hear all about what Marion is doing."

"Well, it's more of the same, Mother, except that I'm with a very good man—his name is Parlier—and I'm working on an assignment that interests me very much."

"Parlier. I know that name. Didn't he do something in England recently?"

"Last year. He went over as consultant on a new locomotive for British Railways. They gave him a decoration. That's quite right."

"And you're working with this man? How clever you are, Marion. Everything about it seems so strange and wonderful to me—such a different world—and you have such a remarkable grip on it."

"Well, Mother," he said, "I live in it. You don't."

"And you like it, don't you? You are happy, dearest?"

"I love my work. And—um—I'm getting happier."

"Were you very upset about Iris?"

"As it turns out, not very."

"Bad show, that," said Lyon. "Sorry to hear it. Damned fine-looking girl."

"Yes, she is. She's making quite a success on television."

"But, darling," said his mother, "how appropriate."

He leaned back with laughter. "Ah, Mother. You don't know how I love your not changing."

"Dearest, what did you do yesterday? Did you have a miserable Christmas all by yourself? Ours was dreary—in an aeroplane—but we had no choice. Was yours awful too?"

"No; it wasn't bad at all. I had—a friend or two in." Del had come over on Christmas Eve with a sealed shopping bag. They had decorated a small tree together—Nick had made most of the ornaments himself—and next morning he had got up early and arranged a trail of presents from the foot of the bed to the tree. Later she had given him the shopping bag which contained practically every book in which he had

expressed interest since he had known her and a little mail-order pamphlet, handsomely wrapped, entitled *How Do You Know You can't Draw?*

It had been a lazy, pyjama-and-slippers day, quite lovely, but kept lovely, he knew, because nothing said or done had strayed from the areas they inhabited together.

"I mustn't forget," said Nick now. He took two little packages from his overcoat pocket. "Not really presents. Just tokens. A couple of things I made myself in the office workshop."

"How utterly sweet," said his mother. Her present was a bookmark of leather, with her initials inlaid in a darker leather.

"Thanks awfully," muttered Lyon. "Jolly decent." His present was a key-ring in the shape of a hunting horn. "Damned nice."

"Indeed it is," said Mrs. St. Andrew. "Darling, our trunks won't be along for weeks, so in the meanwhile may I give you an envelope when you leave?"

This meant a cheque. "If it will please you, Mother. If you'll restrain yourself."

"I'm afraid I shall have to, unfortunately. It's been a ghastly year. There's always something every year at the Hall, we expect it." Dymchurch Hall was Lyon's ancient family seat near Carlisle. "But this year there was entirely new roofing on the west wing and braces underneath it. It cost the earth."

"Well, it's worth it. It's a beautiful place."

"We shall probably nip back in the spring for a month or two," said Lyon, "before we go up to the Cape. Could you possibly come over for a visit?"

"It doesn't seem likely right now, Lyon, but thank you."

"Darling," said his mother, "you do keep so busy."

"Yes. Suits me exactly."

"I know." She hesitated. "Dearest, I wonder have you ever considered going into public life. . . . Lyon and I were discussing it the other day. The Lodge boys seem to do so well at it."

He smiled. "You mean would I consider being a governor or ambassador?"

"Oh, nothing political or mean, but surely something could be arranged."

He took both her hands and smiled affectionately. "Mother dearest, you must understand. I'm not ashamed of what I do. I'm not even not ashamed. I like it. And some day I hope you stop being just a little ashamed."

"Darling," she said tenderly, "no. No. Darling."

I know, he thought looking back at her. I'm thinking the same thing. *Who are you?*

"It's only that if you want to be so very active," she said, "and I don't mean to say a word against your lovely designs—you have perhaps other gifts as well?"

"A mother's eye."

"Not entirely. I'm not such a fool as you think; you know, darling."

"I never did."

"You have a great talent, I know, and I understand that you had to use it. I admire you so. It's just that sometimes I feel you had to bend down to get in a door. And as if you haven't had a chance to straighten up."

"Nonsense," he said gently. "You don't know me any more, Mother. You don't know me very well, dearest, not any more."

She looked at him, already beginning to nod, everywhere except in her eyes where she retained her opinion. "I'm a dreadful mother, I know."

He accepted their invitation to dinner. As they went downstairs later, after he and his mother had had Martinis and Lyon his triple whisky, Lyon said, "Handy thing, this Palm Beach tip. Anne's been working devilish hard this fall."

"Oh? The children's hospital in the village?"

"Yes; some of that," said his mother.

"I should just think some of that," said Lyon. "At least four afternoons a week."

"Well, they are such dears. Besides, as long as we're on the subject of noble works—you won't believe this, Marion—Lyon has been entertaining groups of Americans from the air base nearby. Takes them fishing and riding."

"Mm. Regular guided rambles," said Lyon.

Mrs. St. Andrew put her hand on her son's arm. "You ought to have seen his expression when he came home after the first day. I asked him how he'd got on and he said 'Well enough. They're nice chaps, but they will say "aluminum" and "clerk."'"

"Instead," said Nick, "of 'aluminium' and 'clark?'"

"Quite," said Lyon with his expressionless, teasing expression. "Our words, you know. O.K., buddy?"

All the next day at the office Nick sensed something dormant at the back of his consciousness. As the afternoon drew on, it became clearer: it was the contrast between Del's and Eve's reaction to the news about Buchanan. He had known the facts of their reactions, of course; but only now did he allow his mind really to pose and contrast them.

He felt about Eve's revelation of her feeling for him much as he had felt about the kiss that night in her apartment: his principal wish was that it hadn't happened. He knew that he was extremely fond of her and, usually, entirely comfortable with her; she was humorous and companionable, and, in a vaguely tear-stained way, quite lovely. But he was headed in a different direction, and the knowledge that if he wanted her she was there, was disquieting. However he agreed with her on one point: he was not going to let her feeling for him deprive them of friendship. He would simply let some time elapse before he saw her again.

On his way home he bought a bottle of twelve-year-old Scotch. When he got to the apartment, he made a quick survey to see what was visible in the living-room and studio. He

knew that Buchanan would miss absolutely nothing; so he put away all drawings, plans, notes or reference books that he didn't want to be seen.

Promptly at six o'clock the bell sounded. As he crossed the room to the door Nick thought of his conversation with Buchanan the last time he had seen him. "Value all you've done, Nick," Buchanan had said, "but this is a streamlined operation. We think it's the best thing for greater flexibility and close-hauled work. You understand, don't you?" "Oh, I do, Jess," he had replied. Buchanan had said, "Sure, you do. I depended on you to take the right attitude. Because, believe me, Nick, this wasn't an easy decision for me to reach. I happen to be one of those fellers who rate the human element pretty high in business." Then Jess's telephone had rung and Nick knew that, as far as Buchanan was concerned, he had died. He didn't wait for the other man to finish his phone conversation; he had waved to him and left. He had also sent him a postcard from Italy.

Now after pressing the release for the downstairs door, he waited until he heard footsteps coming up the short stair, then opened his door.

"Ah," said Buchanan as he reached the top, "me old bones creak. Nick, my boy, how are you?"

They shook hands. "Just fine, Jess. Good to see you. Come on in."

Buchanan wore his usual expensive hat, crushed, a suit whose vest didn't quite meet the trousers over his moderately portly belly, and a small bow tie slightly awry. Nick could imagine him tying it, then carefully pulling it a little to one side. As Buchanan sank into an easy chair, his grey thatch tumbling over his forehead, his bright blue eyes twinkling behind the steel-rimmed specs that perched low on his big, humorous nose, he looked like all the storekeepers of New England rolled into one, settling down for a cracker-barrel chat.

"Nice comfortable little place you've got here," he said.

"Unusual but friendly. I'd know in a moment it was yours."

"Well, as a matter of fact, it isn't, really. I've sublet it from a painter I know."

Buchanan nodded immediately. "The artistic touch. The place has it." He pointed at the coffee table, which had a translucent glass top through which one could just see lights glowing. "What's that, Nick?"

"A little thing I built. There's a record player under there that slides out. The speaker's over on that shelf." Soft music was filtering into the room. "Makes it convenient to change records, and the tubes give a nice soft light, especially when the rest of the room is dark."

"Real clever. You put it on the market?"

"No. I just made it for myself. What will you have to drink, Jess? Some of the Scotch I promised you?"

"Perfect. Could I have it over some ice, do you think?"

"Sure. Want the ice cracked?"

"Perfect. A Scotch mist. My favourite drink. Always ask for it in a strange house, by the way. After you finish your whisky, you can suck on the ice until your hostess gets around to offering you another."

While Nick put the ice through the crusher and poured the drinks, Buchanan took out a big curved pipe and stuffed it from a pouch.

"Will I be seeing your beautiful wife?" he asked.

"No; she's not in New York. She's out on the Coast making television movies."

Buchanan tapped his forehead to acknowledge a poor memory. "That's right. I heard that. Is it all going well?"

"Yes, very. They've got a sponsor and the show goes on the air in the spring."

"Isn't that dandy? That's great news."

"Yes." Nick brought the drinks over and settled himself on the sofa.

"Thanks, my boy." Buchanan raised his glass. "Old times."

And new times." They drank and he said, "Ah. This is the McCoy."

"Not bad, is it?"

Nick waited for Buchanan to talk, insisting that the other man extend himself. He had no particular wish to be rude, but Buchanan would have to do the work. Nick refused to initiate small talk for that in itself would imply an overture to main business, and he certainly would not ask Buchanan to get to the point. He sat; and put the entire burden on those broad, slightly bowed, kindly shoulders.

"Nick," said Buchanan, "you're looking very well. Very well, indeed. Have you been working hard?"

"I've been keeping busy."

"Out in California, weren't you? With a household goods manufacturer. Some first-rate work, too, they tell me."

"It's pretty easy to keep looking well in that climate."

"A brother of mine is in real estate in the Hollywood area. Wish I'd known you were heading that way. He might have been able to help you settle. Leastways you and Ben might have had some fun together. He's a great tennis player and if I remember aright, tennis is your game, too."

"Yes." Oh, come on, he thought.

Buchanan wreathed his head in smoke, then sighed. "Well, Nick, I guess we might as well come right to it. You and I are too old for flirting, we might as well get right down to intercourse. Eh? he chuckled."

"Well, Jess," said Nick blandly, "it's clear to both of us that you wanted to see me about something."

"Right. And you also know what it is, my boy. But let's begin by asking whether you're happy where you are now."

"Entirely happy, Jess."

"I'm not surprised to hear it. Parlier is a top man, of course, and if he's that big, I'm sure he's got sense enough to see what he's got in you."

"Well, let's put it this way. I have no complaints."

"Well, I have." Buchanan crossed his legs and slouched in

his chair. The pipe in his mouth spilled some ashes on his vest which he allowed to remain there. (Deliberately? thought Nick.) "Nick, you know me. I run what they call uptown a tight ship. I hope I have some respect for the human element, but when I'm in a position of strength, I play from it. However, when I'm not, I try not to make a fool of myself by pretending that I am."

"Peerless sales are slipping."

"On certain products, yes, a little. In certain areas. The products themselves are as good as ever, at least as good as the competition, some of them a good deal better. A lot of steps are being taken all along the line, but you and I know that the most important place is where the consumer and the product meet. Point of sale."

"You're not satisfied with your packaging."

"And our labels and our bottles and our point-of-sale presentations. Nick, I came down here to eat crow and I will now serve myself a great big portion. Something went out of the whole operation when you left. The sparkle, the lift, the extra something that makes all the difference."

"I'm sure Ferdy has been working very hard."

Buchanan nodded deeply. "Absolutely. And he's a good designer. Perfectly competent. But he isn't you."

Nick put his eyes squarely on Buchanan. "Well, Jess," he said lightly, "he never was."

"That was my mistake. And I'll tell you something else, as long as we're having a man-to-man chin fest. There are several other people who aren't you, either. I've been shopping. Quietly. There's no one I've found who"—he groped with his hand—"who thinks the way I do. Except you. The work your old firm did for us is the kind I need now. The boner I made was in thinking it was Ferdy's work."

"He was in on it."

"Sure, but I saw it the other way 'round. I thought it was his work and that you were in on it. Leastways"—the blue eyes twinkled—"the whole thing was presented so as I

could draw that conclusion. I've been thinking back and Ferdy never actually said so. I took it for modesty on his part. And he just modestied himself into a position where I offered him a contract alone."

"Well—if it was a mistake—we all make them."

"I don't. Not many. Bothers me like the dickens, Nick. Ferdy never actually said anything, so there's no question of a double-cross. And he has very certainly done his best. I'm not blaming him. All he did was open the door. I walked in. I thought I was making a smart move. I walked right into it."

Nick sipped his drink. "Well, Jess, what can I do about it?"

Buchanan smiled, a real Christmas-card heart-warmer. "You feel good, don't you, Nick?"

"Jess, I feel fine."

"Good. That's the whole point of my little *safari* down here. You know that. Nick, what you can do about it is this. Ferdy's contract is up for renewal in two months. I'd like to give him notice and write you a contract to start then. If you want to start earlier, I'll settle his contract now."

"What happens if I don't?"

"Well, honestly, I haven't found anyone I prefer to Ferdy and at least he has the advantage of knowing our organization and our needs. I'd probably continue him for another three to six months while I shop around. I want my next move to be the right one."

"Does he know you're shopping?"

"I hope not. In this work a man gets muscle-bound without confidence. He's a little nervous now because I say what I think: but I don't want him muscle-bound with worry."

"Oh, he's worried, all right. He's very worried."

"You've seen him?"

"Once, since I've been back. We happened to meet in a restaurant. He had the expensive, hollow look."

"What's that?"

"A man who's got a very good income and is frightened of losing it."

"I don't enjoy making a man sweat, Nick. But I've got a responsibility to our stockholders."

"Of whom you are one."

"In a not-so-small way, yes," he nodded, with the candour of a man who acknowledges his religion, not boastfully, but without shame. "I guess I care as much about human beings as the next man. We instituted pension plans and free hospitalization for our people long before anyone in our field. But a business is of use to the people who work for it—president or office boy—only as long as it's healthy, Nick. No use blinking the facts."

"Jess, maybe all that human element is a mistake. I've been thinking about that ever since I saw Ferdy. Maybe what you call the human element—wedding presents and Christmas parties and week-ends with the boss—maybe all that is a mistake, and business ought to be kept as cool and impersonal as possible. Because the human interests and the business interests only overlap as long as things are going well. Maybe it would be kinder never to pretend that they're identical."

"Ah, but, alas, my boy, there's not much alternative. People aren't machines, they're people; and there they are every day—with their stomach troubles and their mortgages. Management has to consider those things, Nick. I know as well as you do—maybe even a little better," he said with a quizzically amiable look, "that where I have to choose between the company and the individual—or even put it crudely: between profit and sentiment—I don't really have any choice. The only difference between one company and another is the kind of etiquette they use about it. And the amount of severance pay they give. But still, Nick, employees *are* people—not comptometers and canning machines. The human element has to be considered."

"For a decent period, before you do the inevitable. Like a widow waiting a year before remarrying."

"Something like that," agreed Buchanan openly. "But—pardon me—you're younger than I am, Nick, and maybe you

think that for that reason it's phony. It isn't. It's important at least to tip your hat to it as you go about your business. Keeps you from becoming a machine yourself. Besides," he added, "if you were in my position, you'd be doing exactly the same thing, reaching the same decisions for the same reasons."

"Oh, I know it. I've hired and fired people."

"There you are, then."

"There I am. Well, maybe automation will provide the answer. People will spend so little time in offices and plants that most of their personal relations will be outside the business world."

"Maybe. But automation will never replace creative people, like you." He tapped his pipe. "As I well know. Let's talk a little more about that. I've rambled on like this, Nick, maybe in self-justification, maybe because I feel a little guilt, maybe because I'm a mite embarrassed. But I haven't just been talking. I made the decision about you because I thought I had to. And though I certainly regret it, Nick, I just can't apologize for it. At least, the only way I can apologize is by coming down here myself. By putting every card on the table. And, incidentally, by putting myself in your hands."

Nick stared at the empty fireplace, trying to look solemn and calm. If pity was being played for, it was not being won. He knew that Buchanan was being as honest as he could be; but he also knew that in relations of this kind the only honesty was self: that if he returned to Peerless and failed, in a little while Buchanan would be talking just as honestly to someone else.

"Well, Nick, do you want to come back with us? You can join the staff as head of your own department or I'll give you a contract and you can operate your own office."

"If I did either, it would be the second. If only for tax reasons. But of course I can't answer you now, Jess. I'll have to think about it."

"Oh, of course. I just want to know that you will think about it."

"In any event, I'd probably need the best part of two months to clean up the job I'm on now for Parlier."

"I see. Well, as I said, that would be all right."

"But if I *am* going to consider it, Jess, I'll have to know the terms of your offer."

Buchanan smiled ruefully. "Nick, I haven't been exactly cagey with you today, have I?"

"You knew there was no point in it."

"Exactly. So I'm prepared to give you a firm two-year contract with a substantial minimum retainer."

"A non-exclusive contract. I could work for other people."

"As your time permitted, certainly. As long as they weren't competitors. But I can promise you it's academic—you won't have much spare time."

"And what's your idea of a substantial retainer?"

Buchanan held out his glass. "Can you spare an old man a little more whisky, Nick? I'm going to need it before we talk money."

[4]

AFTER Buchanan left, Nick had the queer sensation that he was not alone; and he quickly understood why. Del was present, by implication. Misty and unasserted was her hope that he would stay with Parlier or at least would not return to Peerless. It would put him in a "funny situation." Well, now he had heard Buchanan out and had managed to control his pleasure at the size of the offer; he had promised to give his reply in a month. And now he was left with the cold atom that had lived in him since the night Del and he had discussed this business.

It made him angry to know that atom was still with him. He hadn't tried to constrain her freedom of choice about her job and he wouldn't allow her to hamper him, even by implication. Then he stopped being angry, principally because he didn't want to be angry with Del.

But he also stopped because he wasn't sure that he would accept Buchanan's offer. It was true that the terms were especially attractive in the light of the anticipated expense of divorce; by the time Iris was through with him, his small resources might be stripped and his future income considerably hypothecated. It was true too that it would be extremely pleasant to return, like Coriolanus, a conqueror where he had been an outcast. It was truest of all that he wanted his own studio again. Up at the typewriter plant he had overheard someone say "these Parlier people are on an interesting tack"; he didn't want to spend his life as a Parlier person.

Still, he could find the money for Iris if he had to, even if

it meant stepping carefully for a couple of years. As to personal revenge, it was hardly an adult motive for altering the course of a career; anyway, the offer itself, and Buchanan's visit, had gone a long way to feed that appetite. The independent studio was a much bigger temptation. Buchanan made it assured and immediately available; but this was not even remotely a last chance for independence. There was always time.

Nick reflected that, in a curious way, the chief drawback and the chief attraction of the offer were precisely the same: that he would be working again with a man like Buchanan in the midst of a large, efficient and impersonal complex, only sugar-coated with "human relations": with a man who had moved him like a chess piece when it suited him and now wanted to move him again. It took no bloating of pride to resent being used in that manner; but, besides resenting it, Nick found it subtly attractive. After all, it was the kind of thing that happened in the business world, not in terms of vindictiveness or revenge, but simply in the flow and ebb of self-interest. To become the subject of such an action was a kind of certification that he had achieved his aim, had left his relaxed mother and his huntin', shootin' stepfather far behind, was a valuable member of the real world. Accept the contract or not, the offer was a high compliment of the cosmos whose centre he had wanted to reach.

He thought, as he did only infrequently, of his grandfather, the Governor, who had dispersed strikers with rifle fire, of Uncle Perry, who had spent his life making translations of Theognis and the other Greek elegiacs which he published privately, of the generals and chief justices and bishops with whom his family line was studded. He might not really want the Buchanan offer, he might despise the offerer; but to accept it would be to refute completely those rarefied forebears; a complete cleavage. It was a final absolution from their mystique of nobility to accept the mystique of the deal; and a chief aim in his life had been to stand on his own feet in the middle of the twentieth century.

It was curious, too, he thought, that Del was tacitly allied with those forebears in this matter. Perhaps that was one source of the secret atom in him: unconsciously she was making him resist any return to the airiness and conscious superiority of his family, any deviation from the ethics of the men he wanted as fellows.

Well, there was no need to rush a decision. But he might as well bring Del up to date on what had happened. He telephoned her, feeling almost as if he were reporting, and, as he called, he was clearer than he had ever been that they brought each other more than love and not all of it was joy.

She said, "Greetings, little glassmaker."

He said, "What? Oh. Listen, Chuckles. Have you dined?"

"I was just boiling some water."

"Unboil it and come to dinner with me."

"Well, since you put it that way, yes."

They arranged to meet in a Chinese restaurant, and soon they were sitting across a table in a booth, contemplating sweet and sour spare ribs, beef with snow peas, and some fluffy fried rice.

"Incidentally," he said, as he served her, "what was the water boiling for?"

"Oh . . . eggs."

"For dinner?"

"I thought I wasn't very hungry."

He glanced at her plate. "Changed your mind?"

"You know me—madcap."

He scowled. "Are you broke?"

"D-don't be silly."

"You are, aren't you? You spent all your money on Christmas and you're probably in hock."

"I'm not in hock, and what's the difference anyway?"

"Was Myrna going to eat eggs, too?"

"She's not home."

He smote the table with his fist. "You drive me crazy.

You honestly drive me straight out of my head. You were just going to sit there and starve——”

“Oh, Nick, for heaven’s sake, I had a tremendous lunch.”

“The sixty-cent special at Childs’.”

“Seventy.”

He clutched his forehead. “What have I done to deserve this?”

“So s-suppose I didn’t have a tremendous dinner. What does it matter? I’d live. Honestly, th-that kind of thing just doesn’t bother me.”

“Well, it bothers me. You think I want the police knocking on my door some night to ask whether I can identify a wasted body? And what’s worse, you won’t even let me give you any money.”

She folded her arms triumphantly. “That’s right.”

“All right, all right, unknit your virtuous arms and dig in.”

Now, while he was touched by her selflessness, her sense of values that enabled her to believe that some hardships simply didn’t exist or had no importance, now was a good time to bring up the subject of Buchanan. He braced himself.

“The reason I’m so late about dinner tonight is that Buchanan came down to see me.”

“Oh, was this the night?” she said as she ate. “Was it interesting?”

“Yes. He wants me back. Pretty much on my own terms. A contract as an independent, at a very good figure. Even a stock option.”

“What’s that?”

“They permit me to buy some of their stock in the future at a certain figure, below the market price.”

“Independent. That means your own studio.”

“Technically. It’s good for taxes and for my reputation—my name would figure in things—but practically it’s a job with Peerless. I wouldn’t have time for much else.”

“What happens to the other man—Bates?”

"Well, he would be through. He would be through, anyway, sooner or later." He repeated what Buchanan had said about Ferdy's hard work and the fact that he held himself responsible for the original decision to let Nick go. "I didn't press that point, but I must say I thought he was being generous. Maybe he was being generous. Maybe he was just showing me what a grand fellow he is."

"Maybe he meant it."

"He's not such a fool. He knows what Ferdy did. But he also knows that if I don't go back, it's going to take time to find and train the next man. He wants to excuse himself for hanging on to Ferdy for a while if he needs to."

"Mm-hm. Well, are you going back?"

"I said I couldn't do it for a couple of months, anyway, and I'd let him know within a month. I've got to think about it."

He waited.

"Mm-hm," she said, and continued eating.

Again he was angry because she had, in a sense, tricked him: led him to steel himself for an outburst because he was even considering the offer. On the other hand, he thought, maybe she's changed her mind.

But then she was so quiet, as they ate, that he knew she hadn't changed her mind. He couldn't understand her reaction: it was simply baffling.

He weighed whether he ought to ask her about her own offer: then he realized that they both had been reminded of it and he might as well speak.

"What happened about the reading job?"

"I told Mrs. Berger today. I don't think she understood exactly but she was very nice. She said it was sort of a relief because she didn't know where she'd find such a good secretary. She's a doll. She gave me a bottle of vitamin pills."

"Good." He laughed shortly. "I don't know why I said that. But good."

Over their ice-cream, he said, "Del, about New Year's

Eve. There isn't a great deal of time, I guess. Shall we go shopping at lunchtime tomorrow?"

"If you want to, sure. Come back with me to my place after dinner. We'll talk about it."

She had agreed to let him buy the dress, so he didn't anticipate a quarrel about money; he didn't quite see what there was to talk about. But the ground between them was delicate tonight, so he didn't question her further.

During their after-dinner cigarettes, she told him that a poem of Kenneth's had just been accepted by *The Manhattner*, his first real sale.

"Well, huzzah," he said. "Give him my congratulations. I'll bet he's three feet off the ground."

"Not our boy. He's very worried. He thinks there must be something wrong with it. Not because *they* took it; because anybody took it."

"Now really. I mean. That's something of the other extreme, isn't it?"

"From what?"

"I don't know, from commercialism, I guess."

"I suppose so. It's wild but at least it's sort of specially wild. I like it."

He refused to perceive a rebuke. "Have you read the poem?"

"Oh, yes; he shows them all to me. This one confused me a little, but there were three or four lines I thought were terrific."

"I'd like to see old Kenneth again."

"Well, we'll fix an old date, right after the first of the year. Maybe you can cheer him up about his sale."

Brown-haired, quick-eyed, darting girl, he thought, why do we fence? Love is union. Ah well, we are joining. We must. What else in the world is there for us to do?

She made coffee in the kitchenette. She gave him a cup and sat him on the sofa and said, "Don't go away. I've got something to show you." Then she disappeared into the bathroom.

He sipped his coffee and smoked and called in suggestive remarks, to which she made shocked replies. In about ten minutes she came out. The first thing he noticed was that she had fixed her hair. Then he saw that she was wearing an evening gown.

"For heaven's sake," he murmured. "For heaven's sake!"

"Nothing, really. Just a little something I whipped up."

"For heaven's sake."

The material was a kind of subdued gold, quite lovely. But something in his very first glance disturbed, then frightened him.

"Where'd you get it?" he asked.

"I told you, I whipped it up."

"You're joking."

"I kid you not." She faced him deliberately, almost defiantly. "Well? Do you like it?"

"I don't know yet. I'm too overwhelmed. What in the world brought all this on? I mean—I—I'm just—overwhelmed."

"Think I don't even know enough to sew buttons, eh? Think I'm a complete flop, eh? This'll learn you."

"It sure will. If my mouth looks open, that's because it's open. You *made* that?"

"With my own stubby little fingers. The day after you told me about Parlier's invitation, I saw the pattern in the fashion magazine we publish. One of the girls on the staff gave me the pattern and she fixed it so I could get the material at discount. They've got a sewing-room at the office and they let me use their machine for the big stuff. The hem and the tucks and the little things I did here by hand."

"That design is a lulu. A pip. A wowser. The material is exquisite. What more can I say? I'm surprised. I can say that. I am taken aback. A way back."

Now he knew what was disturbing him. It was indeed an excellent design, the cloth beautiful; but to anyone with a skilled eye it was immediately clear that the construction was

not good. The hem was not even, the seams were a bit puckered, the shoulder straps were not exactly the same width, even the neckline was not quite straight. The effect was as of a lovely dress photographed slightly out of focus. If Iris had been offered such a gown, she would have said (as she had once at a dress salon), "Very nice. Now take it away and make it."

He thought of Parlier; and Parlier's shrewd eyes; and the women—all Irises, probably—who would be there on New Year's Eve.

"What brought it all on?" he asked. "It's a lulu, but I expected that we——"

She shrugged. "I just thought I'd do it myself. I mean I had to have one and—well—I didn't want you to have to buy one, and I just thought I'd show you I'm not quite as much of a jerk as you think I am, lover."

He foresaw agony; that was why he had been instinctively frightened. How could he possibly say anything about it? How could he suggest that it be remade or that they buy a dress? And yet not to say anything would be to expose her cold-bloodedly to hypercritics eager to lift a brow.

His mind flew to stratagems. He could be ill New Year's Eve. But he wanted to go to that party; besides it would be equally cruel deliberately to waste all her work and make her sit at home.

"So that's why we were feasting on eggs this evening," he said. "Christmas, plus the cost of that material."

"Well, i-if you want to grovel and be appreciative, you can buy me a pair of shoes to go with it."

"But of course. A privilege. *Sans doute*. Tomorrow to the bootery."

Now, once again that odd persistent anger bored nastily into his bosom. He was angry at her for putting him in this position, for making him feel judicious and snobbish, for making him worry about what Parlier and his crew would think. He was angry at her for making the dress, for just that

good taste and intelligence fuzzed by personal clumsiness that stamped so much of what she did, for shaming him now because she had tried so hard, because she had deprived herself for this and would never have mentioned it. He was angry at her for being herself; for doing precisely the one well-intentioned thing that had put him in a painful dilemma.

How could he possibly take her to the party in that dress? To subject her to snickers that she wouldn't see, but which would exist. Besides, she wasn't just his date; she was his future wife. This was a kind of debut. It would be one of those small unforgettable, *gaffes* terribly difficult to live down. In future, looking back from the cushions of marriage and personal security, she would be glad that he had prevented it from happening.

But how could he tell her? She obviously thought it was perfect. It would be as if he had struck a child who had come to him open-handed with a childish gift.

"Well," he said. "Well, well."

She pirouetted and made the skirt swirl around her excellent tight legs. "Pretty nifty, eh?"

"Yes sir. I've always liked those legs. Dress isn't bad either."

"I feel like the queen of something."

"Well, queen, sit down. I'll get you your coffee. That dress commands respect." In the kitchenette, he even went so far as to consider spilling coffee on the dress, but knew, as he thought it, that it was obvious and dangerous. Besides, the gown could be cleaned in time. He could hardly fill the cup, he was silently cursing so hard at the situation that had driven him to think of these idiotic stale dodges. What was he to do? He could not take her to the party in that dress.

As he returned with the cup, he said, "What does Myrna think of it?" There was an idea; he might speak privately to Myrna, perhaps use her as go-between.

"She loves it. She said it was exactly me."

Either Myrna was blind or very clever. But perhaps he could

phone her at her office tomorrow and consult. She might be willing to conspire.

"What is she doing New Year's Eve?"

"I told you; she's gone away. Gene had a date to play in Montreal, so she took a few days off and went with him."

"Oh."

"You sound betrayed."

"Don't be silly. Why in heaven's name should I sound betrayed?"

She was sitting back grandly in an easy chair, holding the coffee cup. He was looking at the top of her head. She looked up at him: silently. As in the restaurant she was silent so long that it was a comment. She had crossed into another country. She had made a decision.

"Nick, you don't like it, do you?"

For an infinitesimal wink of time he felt an acute blinding thrust of admiration and love. How marvellously perceptive she was, how aware of the unspoken, the hardly thought. But then he turned quickly to defence, to assertion.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Do you, Nick?"

"Are you insane, girl? I told you, I think it's lovely. It's a beautiful cloth, it's a lovely clean design——"

"You don't like it. I can tell."

How? he wondered. What wizardry takes you into me like that?

"Del, you're absolutely insane. You are raving. I don't know what you're talking about."

"No?"

"I can only tell you once more, I think it's a pip."

She sat quietly, facing him, holding the cup. She seemed to him to be listening.

He felt that she had heard and that he might as well speak. "Dearest, it's nothing, absolutely nothing. Really. It's—I don't know—maybe a trifle, a couple of trifles. I meant it

absolutely about the cloth and the cut. But maybe, maybe we could just touch up the hem. Just a touch. O.K.?"

She nodded. "Sure."

"Let's take it to the tailor on my street. He's very good, I think. Did some things for me. He can simply touch it up, all right?"

"What else?"

"Oh, dearest, come on. Don't make me sound as if I hate it, as if I don't appreciate what you've done."

"Of course not. What else?"

"Nothing else. We'll let it go at that."

"Listen, Nick," she said, suddenly sharp. "What else?"

Now he was looking at her steadily. "All right," he said. "Dearest, I think the seams might be redone. They can be ripped out easily, I'm sure. That's not much of a job."

"What about the top of the dress? That needs something, too. Doesn't it?"

He was quite calm now. "Yes, dearest," he said. "We ought to touch up the straps and the neckline."

Suddenly she was on her feet. She had put down the cup and risen to her feet almost invisibly. Her jaw was tense. He had often seen her pale, but never like this. She seemed almost transparent.

"Del," he said, "I'm sorry."

Swiftly she reached up and grabbed one shoulder strap, then ripped it loose from the bodice. It gave her trouble, but she tore it free, clenching her teeth, then she stared at him, trembling and breathing hard.

"What else?" she said.

The cold atom that had been buried in him for days seemed now to insist on its presence. He found himself on his feet, too, speaking with a deeper voice than he knew he had.

"Look, Del," he said carefully, "let's not have any childishness, shall we? Let's not have any silliness. If I can't even talk to you, if we can't speak to one another, discuss a thing like a dress——"

"Well?" she said stabbingly. "Well? If we can't?"

"You're doing your best to make me look like an ungrateful boor, as if I didn't appreciate what you've done and, how you've——"

"Jesus Christ Almighty," she said hushedly, awfully. "You think it's the damned dress?" Then she tore off the other strap, unzipped the side, ripped loose the top of the open slit and pulled the whole thing off. She stood there in her slip, beginning to cry. "You think it's the damned dress?" She flung it at his head.

The cloth stung his face like a whip. Fire seared down to the cold atom and shocked it to explosion.

"All right," he shouted, "suppose I am considering the Peerless job! What's wrong with that? I know the drawbacks just as well as you do, but why in the world can't I consider it? Like a rational person? What in God's sweet name is wrong with that?"

"Do what you like. Consider what you damned please. *Take* the job. I don't care."

"You sit up there like a little queen lopping off heads right and left, and you decide what's pure and what's not——"

"I told you, you can do what you damned well please. I wouldn't do a thing to stop you. You——"

"Yes. I can do what I please," he nodded briskly. "And you can hang there on the cross of your own sweet superior view and suffer it all very nobly." He advanced on her. "Did you ever take a moment to think of it my way? Did it ever occur to you that I can see the situation just as clearly as you and that I might have my reasons?"

She put up her hand as if to ward him off, the fingers outstretched. "You're right, you're right. You're sensible, you're smart. You just go ahead and see your reasons, see the good old pros and cons, and do what any clever man would do. You go ahead and have your revenge. You just swell your pretty little heart with pride and go back to a fat dish of

revenge. Y-you're right. Just go act like any happy little ambitious character. Go on."

"Oh, for God's sake. The minute anyone sets a foot in the real world, to you he becomes sordid and petty and——"

"I didn't say that."

"No, but you might as well have. You think that all I care about is knifing a man who once knifed me."

"Oh, I'm sure there's more money, too, and——"

"Well, pardon me all to hell. I know that's a great big black mark against me, you wouldn't be nearly as upset if I were taking a cut, but yes, judge, there *is* more money. And there's a lot else involved, too—if you could ever come down off your cloud and give one honest damn about what really makes me tick."

"What else can there possibly be? If it's another job you want, you could have your choice of trillions. Why do you have to take just this one?"

"I don't know that I will take it, but I damned well do know why I might. Because it would give me a chance to snap my fingers at just the kind of high-flown nonsense I've been running away from all my life. I hate it. The people I'm for are the ones up to their hips in the world and who get a little dirty as they go. And the ones I'm against are the lily-whites—too pure for vulgar commerce, for the men who make the deals and build the houses and the cars. To my family—and probably to you, too, and your poetical and musical friends—this whole century's a disaster. There's no quality any more because we have juke-boxes instead of harpsichords, because designers do TV cabinets and washing machines. And even take suggestions from their bosses! I know just what they say in Palm Beach and in the Village garrets, too. One standard for them and another for the slobs. They're one kind, and the other kind, poor dears, do have to dribble and sully themselves. Success, the bitch goddess. Money, the boa constrictor. And as for dealing with the dealers by the standards of the deal—well, we just won't even talk about that."

She had listened to him, motionless. Now her head shook slightly. "S-so if you really believe all that, why are you sore at Ferdy?"

"Because even in the vulgar dirty market-place there are house rules, honey. You try to take the other guy but you don't use crooked dice."

"No use. No matter how you slice it. You can't make me believe that all this comes naturally to you. You can't make me believe you're not deliberately turning your back on things."

"You are damned right," he said vehemently. "You couldn't be righter. It doesn't come naturally. I had to learn it, and I want to learn more. I'm turning my back as hard as I can on all the unrealistic nonsense. I'm the lad for Here and Now."

"I see. I see," she said quickly, nervously.

"And if I take this job, it will be because it's one more step toward reality, toward being just another Joe working away at something he likes."

"Go ahead. Be a Joe. What's to stop you?"

They faced each other, rigid and close. Faintly he was aware of steel hoops encircling them both, spinning fast with a high hard sound.

"Exactly," he said. "Nothing. At all

"There you are, then. Go ahead."

He smiled bitterly. "It's that smugness, that superiority. As if you were an archangel just streaming with pity for poor misguided mortals."

"Oh, you goddam idiot," she burst out, "can't you see it's not that, it's just plain disappointment."

"What!"

"Oh, sure, I know I haven't any more right to that than anything else. What am I, a stupid little stumble-footed flop who had a hard time learning to be just a—a mechanical office slave and I still bumble half the things I touch. But I had a happy hope when I met you, Nick, that you might be an anchor—not an anchor, a balloon—that maybe you were reaching or you would want to reach again and I could go up

with you. O.K., so I was wrong. So you're not interested. So that's that."

"So here I am starring as Judas Iscariot."

"Oh, get out, will you? I'm tired of this whole damned thing." She turned away from him. "Anyway, it's all my fault. You're right—it was all in my head, I suppose. I thought that the—the fellow you once were, that you were going to be, the man in Chicago and in those magazines, I thought you might be that way again. Only more so."

He flushed and said coldly, "You mean—all this whole damned time—you've been thinking of me as a sell-out, a compromiser."

"No, I haven't," she said strongly but sadly. "I was glad you went with Parlier. At least it wasn't Wank. I hoped you'd go on your own but if you had to work for someone else, I was glad it was a good man. But I thought that when you moved—when you did get your own place again, it would really be yours, for your own work that you ought to be doing, it would really be——"

"The real me, I suppose. Is that what our girl has been praying for?"

She twitched. "Oh, for God's sake——"

"A brick wall," he said. "Hopeless. You think it's been a toboggan slide since Harvard and Chicago instead of what I've wanted most. You think it's all been one long sordid desecration."

"Oh, get out, will you? Take the damned job and leave me alone."

"I may very well do both."

She whirled back. She was furious. Her fingers were clenched, her jaw worked a little. If he weren't so angry himself, he might have been frightened.

"All right, Nick. You've said it. That's all."

"And please don't trouble yourself about my conscience. I know just where I am and why. I can see the grease and I know how it got there. I know it belongs there. I feel fine."

"I'm sure. I can see it. You feel great. You know—you know something," she said in a strained tone of friendly advice, "you ought to take that job. Don't miss it. You should take it. It's just right. It's got all the grease and all the real down-to-earth reality that you need, boy. And just look at the bonus. You'll be booting out that poor wretched man who double-crossed you."

"Well, if it comes to that, what the hell else does he deserve?"

"Just exactly that," she said swiftly, almost conciliatingly, "just exactly that. There probably aren't three or four people in the whole world who would be too big to take the revenge. And there probably aren't any more who'd mind being used by that Buchanan or whatever his name is, being flicked on and off like an electric light switch, spending the rest of their lives, every day, with a swell warmhearted genuine human being like him. You'll love him. You two should be very happy together."

The balance had swung in him. Until tonight it had been a little fear outweighed by a great love; but now he saw the future, harried and harassed by her wispy judgments, a life torn and tugged by all her flights of unreasonableness, by her belief that they were purer than his own mundane scrabbings. He saw endless balancing and fretting and conciliation, not with a partner, with a dependent.

It was not for this that he was getting divorced.

"Del," he said, his voice hard and dry, "you're on a cloud. You're out of reach. There's just nothing to answer because you don't understand a word I say. You don't want to understand. You just——"

"Sure. Sure. I'm childish, I'm silly, I'm difficult, I'm crazy. Th—that's all absolutely true," she stuttered with wide-eyed sincerity. "And—and don't forget. You're a pretty marvellous person. You're a success. You haven't compromised a thing. You're living right up to the finger-tips of everything that's good in you. You're not half asleep inside of you. No, sir! You're real, boy. You're just the very best human being you

could possibly be and don't you forget it for one moment."

It wasn't the job, he thought. It was themselves. The Buchanan offer was simply the instance that had crystallized the fears.

"It's impossible," he said. "I can't cope. I can't get near you. What do you see? When you look out the window what century do you see? Where the hell *are* you?"

"You're right. Nowhere near you. Not anywhere near you."

"You're blind, and I'm the one who can't see. It's a very neat way of——"

"Oh, get out! God damn you. It's all blown up. It's every damned thing I was afraid of blowing up right in my face. Get out. Get *out*!" She seized an ash tray and, grimacing, threw it at him hard. It struck him in the chest.

How welcome the blow was. Warm and welcome. It was the last axe stroke that parted the rope.

He was afraid that if he waited she would come at him with her fingers—she stood there shaking and hating—and he didn't want it to end like that. It was bad enough now.

He turned and picked up his hat and coat and strode out. He closed the door firmly behind him, but he didn't slam it. The moment was too terrible, too true for a self-gratifying exit.

He went down the long stairs (for the last time?) knowing, as if it were an echo that faded away behind him, that he was leaving a love yet moving forward with a sense of escape: of unburdening.

[5]

FERDY BATES telephoned him at the office next afternoon but Nick told his secretary to say he was in conference and to omit any reference to returning the call. There could be only one reason why Ferdy was phoning; he must have a spy in Buchanan's office who had tipped him off about yesterday's conference. Nick saw no reason to discuss the matter with him. In fact, the call was so clear a light on the man's character that Nick felt strengthened by revulsion.

He thought of Del, without regret, without loneliness; with a tenderness that was already discernibly remote as, in an episode rich and poignant but floating away. The heat of the quarrel had evanesced, as he knew it would; their last quarter of an hour could not mar everything before it. He thought that they had had what each other could give and that they were lucky—even if harshly so—to have stopped before they mistook a few months for a lifetime, before they put on a few strands the strain that only a thick-woven fabric could bear. He would help her, always, if she would let him, but he knew she wouldn't; he would be her friend but he knew she would not have it.

In any event he thought it best not to talk to her for a while. It was ironical and eerily amusing to think that in a few hours he had progressed from a resolution to marry her, to a feeling of relief, of refreshment and renewed possibility. He thought this was a proof that they were right to part. For her sake equally. Huge, sweeping concepts had flooded through his brain

since last night. For some reason his mind was not concentrating on the specific of the Buchanan proposal, but was playing with immensities. He thought of trial by fire and of pain, the pain of birth. He thought, for the first time since he had entered his thirties, how young he was, how especially young thirty-five is. He thought for what reason he could not guess, of the stark fact of human greatness.

He took work home with him from the office as insurance against brooding, but found he was not especially moody or unsettled. Indeed he seemed to have moved from a forest of contesting emotions on to a savannah of relative peace. He had been a much more unsettled man a week ago, a month ago; and he was sure that Del too was (or would soon be) sharing this sense of release, the end of tension and responsibility.

Nick saw as endorsing his state his complete lack of regret at having altered his life for Del—leaving Wank, coming back to New York, divorcing Iris. Del had been the catalyst to provoke those actions, but they were all still positive goods in his life, he knew, in spite of what he had just happened. Now he could never thank her for them. "I am not that much of a clod," he thought wryly.

Next day Ferdy called again, and again Nick directed his secretary to say he was tied up. That night at home he was sketching several methods of redesigning a cam to fit within the new typewriter frame when the telephone rang. He felt relaxed and tidy and industrious, in Basque shirt and slacks, as he reached for the phone.

"Say, Nick, is that you?"

It was Ferdy. Nick's heart sank a notch. "Yes. Who is this?" he asked superfluously.

"It's Ferdy, Ferdy Bates. I called you at the office a couple of times, feller, but you were busy. I hope you don't mind my ringing you at home."

"Not so far."

"Nick, I was wondering whether you were busy right

now, whether you could join me for a drink or dinner or something."

"I'm sorry, Ferdy. I've got some people coming by in a little while," he lied, "and I've got to get ready."

"Well, look, it wouldn't take long, Nick. Look, could I possibly drop 'up? For just a few minutes? 'Smatter of fact, I—I happen to be just around the corner."

Oh, my God, thought Nick, and felt ill with embarrassment. Ferdy, who lived up in Westchester, had come all the way downtown just to be able to make that remark. But perhaps it wasn't so strange; the man who had done what Ferdy had done two years ago would have no steel in him to prevent his crawling.

"Ferdy," he said, "it's no use. We both know what it's about and it's no use."

"But, Nick, I just want——"

"I haven't made up my mind yet, but there's absolutely nothing for us to say to each other."

"Nick. Nick. Just listen a minute. You've got a good job," he blurted, obviously out of sequence. "You're with a top office. You can go anywhere."

"Please, Ferdy, this is all very——"

"Let me come up. I won't stay over five minutes, I promise you."

"For heaven's sake, Ferdy——"

"Why do you want it? Wouldn't you rather stay with a man like Parlier that you can trust rather than——?"

"Ferdy, I haven't hung up on anyone in years. Now don't make me hang up on you."

"Just listen. Don't let me come up, then, just listen. Nick, I—I'm really down. If he'll only keep me six months, I need it. He'll tie a can to my tail if he bounces me, Nick, and I need the six months. Everyone in town knows we're not getting on and it's not like it was with you, I don't have your reputation as an independent. I need that extra six months to prove myself, to get on my feet."

"Ferdy, this whole conversation is just horrible. Why in the world do you want to——?"

"I'm telling you, Nick, I'm down. And I'm scared. My mother-in-law was sick in bed with a private nurse for fourteen months before she died and I had to carry the whole thing. It took every nickel. I don't even have an equity in my house any more. Nick, I've got two kids. I'm scared."

Fury skyrocketed in Nick. He wanted to shout: What the hell do you mean by telling me all that? All right, you're a little drunk, but still what right do you have to put it on me? What have I to do with your private affairs?

"Ferdy," he said, "I'm very sorry. I really am. I know your family and I like them. I've been sorry for them for some time. I wish there were something I could do, but whatever it is I'm considering, I'll just have to work it out by myself."

"Nick, let me at least——"

"No, Ferdy, let's not. I mean, let me cut this short. More for your sake than mine. Please." Ferdy started to say something again, but he continued: "You must excuse me, Ferdy. I'm going to say goodbye to you, right now. Goodbye, Ferdy. Good luck."

He expected the telephone to ring again immediately, but it didn't. Nick went back into the studio feeling neither powerful nor outraged, but grave and somewhat uneasy. We're all crooks and contrivers to some degree, he thought, but at least most of us obey the game laws. The trouble with people like Ferdy is that they lack the imagination to see the results of their actions. The poor boob ought to have foreseen that sooner or later he would be making that appeal in some form or other to someone, if not to me.

Still Ferdy's call weighed on him. He had of course known that Ferdy's displacement was an element in his decision; but the call made it so vivid as almost to throw everything out of proportion. Just as his original resolve to snub Ferdy had been tempered by the actual meeting in the bar. Theories about

people and behaviour in the human presence were not identical, and revenge was not entirely sweet.

But he was going to act on principle, whatever he decided. The house rules of the game. When the Ferdy thing had first happened and he knew he had been swindled, he had been willing to shrug it off. "Those things happen." But he had changed; he could no longer shrug so easily. He remembered how shocked he had been by Ferdy in the bar because Ferdy didn't seem to realize that he had broken any rules.

He cared more now about the rules themselves and about winning. Lately, he had come to care more about a lot of things: for instance, about a private life full of rewards instead of mere tranquillity. He supposed the change had happened in the last four or five months, and of course he knew why. He hoped, entirely humbly and affectionately, that he had been able to do something for her.

What a pity that. . . . Ah, but there was no point in going into it again.

On December 31st he felt it would be mere pettiness not to call Del and give her good wishes. He rang her at Tappan in the afternoon and was told by the switchboard that the place had closed early that day. He telephoned the apartment and there was no answer.

He tried again after dinner and once more at 10.30 after he had dressed, without success. He wondered whether she had gone out with Kenneth and whether she had repaired and was wearing the dress. There was no jealousy in him, only a sense of mystery that a short week ago they had been lovers, unsure but passionate. He felt a clear gap in human custom and culture because there was no benediction extant for him to utter.

Parlier had a duplex apartment on the East River, and the elevator let Nick off at the lower floor into a small glowing vestibule with black-and-white chequered linoleum underfoot. A maid took his coat and a white-jacketed Japanese guided

him to the wide, curved stairway inside. He climbed to the sound of music growing louder, feeling that it was part of the stairs under his feet. He entered a vast living-room lighted by dozens of candles and filled with just enough people to keep it from seeming empty.

"Aha!" said Parlier, coming to greet him. "Here is my little gentleman. And where is the gentleman's lady?"

"Bad luck, Ghee," said Nick, shaking hands. "She's ill, suddenly ill. She sends her deepest regrets."

"Damn. I wanted to see what kind of taste you have. Well, I pick up the telephone and in twenty minutes you have a replacement."

"No; please don't bother. It's perfectly all right, really."

"Ah, a purist. Well, it is your New Year's Eve, my friend; suit yourself. But you see that blonde over there. Suzy Oliver. I think she will be alone. I do not think our friend Clandon will get back from Akron tonight."

"Well, we'll see. Meanwhile, why don't I just get in there and mingle?"

"Come, I present you."

Nick walked forward with Parlier's arm around his shoulders toward the busy face, suddenly feeling no anticipation at all. Since he wasn't forlorn, he assumed it was just because, after all that had happened, he was a little tired.

Part Four

. . . calls them the iceberg men
Two-thirds submerged in embarrassment and ease,
The Ivy League boys now Vined in Hollywood, the Phi Beta
prez now key man in TV,
Wanders through the bus lanes singing, "Arise, ye prisoners of
nutrition, let us be what we are, is this the end for which Erasmus
sowed and Jefferson flowered, the Age of Anesthesia, the
Century of the Too Common Man?"

KENNETH MAYER: *Through Manhattan with Gun and Camera.*

[I]

THE early February sun was so delicious that Nick could almost taste it. He lay on the beach, his arms beneath his head, his eyes closed, perfectly willing to believe that another climate, a past or future life, did not exist: that he was borne by the silken sand inside a great warm porcelain ball hung nowhere.

"Nick," Eve called easily from the porch of the hotel.

"Uh?"

"Didn't wake you?"

"Uh-uh."

"I'm 'bout to go in and get myself a beer. Shall I fetch you one?"

"All right, thanks."

"Cristal or Hatuey?"

"Hatuey, please."

He had been in Cuba four days, although it was difficult to think of it in terms of time. His stay here felt like a leisurely royal progress, decked with alternate broad bands of velvet sun and velvet star-flecked night. He didn't feel especially joyous; principally, he felt nonexistent.

Eve padded up beside him. "Here, beachcomber. Tuck this in."

He opened one eye. She stood next to him in bathing suit, broad-brimmed beach hat and dark glasses, holding out the frosty beer shell.

"Obliged, ma'am."

"Mm-hm."

She sank on to the sand near him, with her own back rest, her own beer glass, and a book. They took long pulls, and he sighed and said, "This beats working. You may quote me."

"Too subversive. How's your chest?"

"Done to a turn. How's yours?"

She chuckled. "Nothing been wrong with mine."

"Indeed not."

The second week in January, Nick had caught a bad cold which had quickly developed into a short and intense attack of 'flu. He didn't mind being sick once in a while as a kind of change of pace and perspective so long as it wasn't painful or too long; but he did mind being sick all by himself.

For the first week of the month he had been working especially steadily—going to the office on Saturday and staying late in the evenings. The typewriter assignment had developed a few kinks—revealed by the first mock-ups—but that wasn't the real reason he had worked so hard; he didn't feel like doing anything else. He had had a disaster in his private life and he had thought that for a while he would try not to have any private life, at least not until he was able to look about relatively calmly. He was not in a melodramatic slough of despair or delirium of rebound; he was not looking for Foreign Legion forgetfulness. He simply wanted less to his private life for a while than there had been.

But the cold and the 'flu quickly taught him differently. Even a minor illness breeds some self-compassion; he felt lonely and exceptionally unprized. The delivery boys from the food market and the drugstore were not even cold comfort; and he had to be on guard lest, in his weakness, he allow the two friendly sweet old ladies who lived above him to get a foothold in his apartment. Josie, the cleaning woman, cooked for him when his fever was high. Mrs. Reid, his secretary, came down two evenings to make dinner and he was so irritated by the contrast with the usual solitary state of things that he was gruff and rude to her. She laughed and called

him a grouch as he grumbled at the service that pleased him.

He supposed that, more than most, he was not really constituted to live alone. He had done so at various times—particularly in those periods between college and marriage when there had been no current love affair. But it was not a kind of independence he cherished. Perhaps this feeling, as much as anything else, had impelled him to marry Iris. She had filled a house so beautifully.

And so he thought of Del.

It was pity that he felt most, as time carried him on—not for her or for himself but for the love that could not prosper. Too very bad, he thought. It had been such a lovely love. Pity that there couldn't have been more to it. He wondered how she was and he hoped, without any slightest patronization, that she was not suffering much. He knew that—not because of anything he was but because of what she was—she was bound to suffer somewhat. And there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. To see her or even to telephone would almost certainly be the wrong thing to do; besides he didn't know what to say.

He spent some time as he lay there thinking of devious ways to keep an eye on her and even, if necessary, to help her. He decided that Myrna would be his best means. In a few weeks he would ring Myrna at V.B.S.

The day before the doctor said he could get up Eve telephoned him.

"How you feelin'?" she asked after they had greeted each other.

"Disembodied. Like a mummy in a tomb waiting to be opened. I can hear the picks and shovels approaching."

"Been havin' a rough time?"

"Not terribly, but I'm not going to admit it."

She chuckled. "Nick, I called your office—they told me you were home sick—I called you to apologize."

"For God's sake. What for?"

"Well, for the silly way I acted last time I saw you. That

was real silly stupid of me, Nick, and very embarrassin'. I hope you'll forgive me and forget it."

"I can't do either. There's nothing to forgive and I don't intend to forget it."

"You are a dreadful person."

"I try. How have you been?"

"Oh, they can't keep me down with rocks. Look, honey, let me not get off the subject for a moment. There're a few people comin' over for drinks Saturday night and I would like for you and Del to come along, too. I really would. If you're well enough. If you'd like to."

"If I'm well enough, I'd love to come."

"Won't you please bring her too, Nick? I'd love to have her."

"I know you would. I know you. But—er—what we were talking about last time—well, it's not quite the same any more."

"Oh?"

"There's—well, I suppose that's all I can say just now."

"Of course, honey." Evidently a thought struck her. "You been lyin' there sick and all alone?"

"Pretty much. Most of the time."

"But honey, that's terrible. Whyn't you let a person know?"

"Well——"

"Who's been fixin' for you?"

"Oh, I've been making out. The maid's been helping. And my secretary comes down once in a while and keeps an eye on me."

"But who's been fixin' your food?"

"Oh, I just heat up cans of things and flop back into bed."

"That's the ugliest thing I ever heard. You ought to have proper food, honey. A good decent dinner."

She didn't ask. He knew she couldn't. He said, "Why don't you?"

"All right. I will." She chuckled. "You're a terror."

"Twenty-three skiddoo."

She brought a thick steak ("Build you up, honey; you look like a ghost's ghost"), baked two huge potatoes and made her green beans with bacon. She arranged a pretty tray for him and had her own dinner on a small table beside his bed. The food was excellent and the air was cosy, but she was careful to urge no sense of ownership or return. She had marked out a course for the evening, he perceived, and as soon as she had washed the dishes she left.

He returned to the office two days later, feeling paradoxically both leaden and lightheaded, and tackled the revisions that the mock-ups had proved necessary. Two days after that he took Eve to dinner and a play. Three days later she invited him to dinner at her apartment, after which they talked and listened to some records and then made love.

"Darlin'," she said later in the dark, "you know what I think? I think you're my friend."

"I am, Eve."

"That's enough. For a while, Nick. You gentle man."

The love-making, full as it had been, had in it an almost restful quality—not like the fire with Del. It had not been passion so much as the highest compliment they could pay each other. He knew that was what she meant.

Later, after they had made love again and were lounging and drinking, she told him that she was going away on Saturday for two weeks, down to Varadero in Cuba, where she always spent her vacations. She never went away in summer ("I'm Southern, heat sets good on me") but she liked to escape from the Northern winter for a while. She asked him to join her there if he could; but he didn't think it possible, or likely.

The next Monday he woke up with another cold and by Tuesday he not only felt ill, he felt heavily depressed. He told Parlier that he had to do something to snap himself out of this physical slump, that in two days he would have completed the revisions so that the typewriter company could go ahead and build the metal pilot-machines. He suggested

that he take a week off in the sun. Parlier agreed at once and recommended a hotel run by a friend of his in Nassau; Nick thanked him and said he thought he'd try Cuba. As for the expense entailed, Nick was just in the mood to think only that there would be that much less for Iris.

Jesse Buchanan had somehow found out about Nick's earlier illness and had sent him a basket of fruit; Nick had written a note of thanks. Now he called Buchanan, said the month was nearly up, but that because of his illness things had got out of hand. He asked for another ten days or so and Buchanan agreed readily.

For almost four weeks the Peerless offer had hung with him like a locket. In a way he had stopped considering it because he had thought that it was inevitable that he accept it. The only reasons why he hadn't told Buchanan so were because he wanted to exercise the full period of consideration and because Del had tacitly assumed that his hesitancy was self-deception, that he had already decided to take the job when he first spoke of it to her. He wanted, if not to break the pattern she had set for him, at least to bend it a little, even if she didn't know about it. At any rate he could think of no other explanation for his reluctance to tell Buchanan now, for requesting an extension.

He cabled Eve that he could come for a week and asked her to book a room in her hotel. She replied, "Hurry." On Saturday he took a big plane to Miami and a smaller plane to the airstrip at Varadero, where Eve was waiting with a taxi. Six hours after he had put on a heavy overcoat to go to the airport he was sitting in a Hawaiian shirt on a sunlit terrace with bougainvillea on one side of him, with daiquiris and Eve on the other.

Varadero, he discovered, was an ideal place to do nothing. The air proclaimed it. They lounged on the beach; drank native beer and rum, wandered through the lazy, wide streets of the fishing quarter, and ate mountains of fresh *congrejos* and *langostas*, stone crabs and crayfish. This was Eve's fourth

winter here; everywhere she went she was "Senorita Eva" (the Cubans had given up struggling with "Reynolds"), and she knew to whom practically every child belonged. In the evenings they went to one of the small local night clubs and danced to Cuban music as best they could; one night they went out to the Florida-type hotel on the outskirts of town and danced to the imported American band. Day by day they idled together. And every night, feeling just tired enough and slightly drunk, they made love.

To Nick the days were an essence compounded of rum and sea-food and the spicy scent of Eve's skin and of Havana tobacco. He didn't like the Cuban cigarettes, but at every run-down little shack of a store you could buy the world's prize cigars, which in New York were available only at the best shops. They were relatively cheap and he wreathed himself in imperial smoke.

Now on the beach she handed him a cigar. "Thought you might like this with your beer."

"You thoughtful thing." He glanced at the label. "Ah, Upmann."

"Oopmahn down here, honey."

He reached over and lighted her cigarette, then the cigar, which had not been wrapped in cellophane, yet had kept beautifully fresh in this atmosphere. They reclined and smoked and watched a sardine fisherman far up the beach, with trousers rolled high, wade down the sloping sand shelf, through the mild waves, and cast his net.

"Nice little ocean you've got here," said Nick.

"We aim to please."

"Do I not know?"

She said, "I wish it could go on a long time."

"Time. I've heard that word. Meaning escapes me just now."

Porfirio, one of the little hotel's two little bellboys, came out by and by with a letter for Nick. "'*Cba' gracia*,'" said Nick in his best Cuban accent, and the boy charmed them with his smile.

"Well, guess who," said Nick as he opened the letter.

"Sears Roebuck?"

"Ol' Uncle Jess Buchanan, that's who. Kindly ol' Uncle Jess. He hopes I'm soaking up the vitamins. He envies me. He even calls me a 'lucky dog.' He hopes to see my good tanned self when I get back."

"I'll just bet he does."

That night they went to a bad movie and Nick got a headache. They stopped in at the Castillito for a drink and the regular band wasn't there. The substitutes were ragged and they aggravated his headache. It was the first night in Varadero that he didn't take Eve to her room.

Next morning at breakfast she was wearing an extremely pretty flowered frock and he realized afresh as he sat opposite her what a wise and comfortable woman she was: capable of silences. He felt again strongly how fortunate he was to know her, and to know her this well; yet as they ate their incredibly juicy grapefruit he wondered, for the first time, what they were going to do all day.

"Nick," she said, "I thought maybe you might like a change. I thought maybe we might hire a car today and go for a drive. There's some nice towns around here, lovely things to see."

"That's a dandy idea." My knowing friend, he thought. My grown-up friend. "Not Havana, though. I was there once on a cruise. That was enough."

"For me, too, honey. It's too far, anyway. But Matanzas is kind of a cute place. And we could go up on the hill beyond and see the Yumuri Valley. Real pretty. Practically my favourite spot around here."

"I'm for it."

For the first time, too, he was conscious of the other guests. They were mostly Americans, although there were also a few Cubans and Mexicans. Certain faces and groups had touched his consciousness in his five days here, but now they became people. He wondered—again for the first time—whether he and Eve were a topic of discussion.

He rented a shiny Plymouth from Porfirio's father—equipped with chimes instead of a horn—and they took the road along the coast to Matanzas. Past glimpses of diamond-topped blue water, through villages inhabited seemingly equally by very hard-working and very lazy men, past fields of henequen and cane, past roaring modern buses and skinny men on skinny horses, they wound their way until they came over a rise and saw the great crescent of Matanzas Bay with the city in its centre.

Nick had been in Mexico and Guatemala several times, once with Iris, and he thought that Matanzas was a great deal like every other Latin-American city he had seen: the *zocalos*, the baroque churches, the streets of open shops, the residential streets with the relatively blank-walled houses secreting their beauty within. People complained about the homogeneity of American towns, but he wondered how a man set down suddenly in a Latin-American city would know which one it was. They were infinitely richer in materials and craft, they had a warmer tang of humanity than the towns of Kentucky and Kansas, but like them, they were made from a master plan.

They strolled for a while until the sun grew insistent, then drove to the top of the mountain behind the city and had lunch at a refreshment stand: thick pieces of ham between slices of the somewhat stale loaves that Cubans liked, with good Cuban beer. Then they rested under a tree looking down over the broad, placid valley of the Yumuri. The valley was chequered with fields whose fertility was almost audible and which were filigreed with lofty lines of palms among their borders.

"It's lush, all right," said Nick. "It looks like the picture on the inside of a cigar box."

"Look," said Eve, "down there, the ox cart. Hardly seems to be moving, does it? Everything seems stopped. The whole place seems like it's goin' on like that forever."

He looked past her profile at the valley and agreed. It was so true that, curiously, he wanted to leave, but she was settled comfortably, smoking, gazing down at her favourite view.

[2]

NEW YORK, as always to Nick, was its own reward for coming back from a vacation. But usually there was a brief period, perhaps a day or only a few hours, when the vacation impinged on the return, an overlapping of rhythms, a transition period in which his habits and frame of mind had to follow his body back home. It didn't happen this time. When he walked in his door, it was as if he had just gone out for a paper. When he entered the office on Monday morning it might have been after a week-end. He wondered whether this was good or bad; and then wondered why it had to be one or the other.

He got two dinner invitations his first day back: one from Parlier, for that night with himself and Jacobson; another by telephone from Buchanan for Wednesday evening. "I can get a private dining-room at the club," said Buchanan. "We won't be interrupted and we won't be snooped on."

Nick knew that Buchanan would want his answer on Wednesday. "All right, Jess," he said. "How about seven o'clock?"

He had to wait in his office for Parlier after work and when he was alone he telephoned Eve. "Cristal or Hatuey?" he said when she picked up the phone.

"Oh, honey," she said, "don't be cruel. Never saw New York look so stony or feel so cold as today. I'm just achin' for that lil' ol' beach."

"Otherwise, how are you?"

"Well," she said, "I was happier last week."

"It was nice," he said. "It was so nice, Eve."

"You're not about to say 'Thank you,' are you?"

"No; I won't. I understand."

"Yes; you do. That's the dreadful thing about you."

He had to make an appointment with her. It was odd, but, although he had known her in New York for years, he felt now that she was part of the Varadero context, that seeing her here had become a trifle incongruous. She seemed somewhat out of place in an active and variable world. "Are you free Friday night, Eve? Can I see you?"

"Oh, honey, I can't Friday night. I've had a date for a month. But," she laughed, "I'm free on Saturday."

"So am I. Let's have dinner and then decide whether to see a play or a movie or something."

"I'd admire to."

Jacobson was a tall, stiff-necked man with heavy parenthetical brows and an autocratic but friendly manner. He lived upstate and had never been a New Yorker, but he insisted on selecting the restaurant. Parlier sighed. "My poor stomach. All right. My firm is working for you; my stomach shall work for you, too. But for one night only."

Jacobson said unperturbedly, "Be easy, Parlier. This place I know makes the best tuna-fish pop-overs in New York."

He took them over to the East Side to a brownstone house, unmarked by any sign, and into a humming restaurant.

"New to me," said Parlier.

"Just a little place where all the tourists go," said Jacobson.

They had dinner in a small room with an immense black-marble fireplace and only four other tables. The menu was ominous; it contained nothing but roadhouse staples—chicken, steak, beef. Jacobson recommended beef and they were served three gigantic rare slices, as good as any Nick had ever eaten. The cigars that Jacobson ordered after coffee and brandy were also gigantic, as was the check.

Most of the conversation was critical of the work Nick's group had done on the typewriters and comptometers and

other office equipment, but Nick could tell by the area covered by the criticism, which was small, that most of the work was liked. The only thing that bothered him somewhat was Parlier's failure to defend him on the points Jacobson raised with which Parlier had not previously disagreed. However he supposed grudgingly that Parlier had a right to change his mind.

Jacobson was one of those business-men whose policy was that, if they said nothing derogatory about your work, that was praise enough. It was a policy Nick disliked. It resembled the conduct of Dr. Johnson and Clarence Day's famous father, which was supposed to be charming because if a crusty, unpleasant man said something pleasant to you once a year, it proved that underneath it all he had a heart of gold; so his generally prevalent crustiness could be endured. Nick much preferred generally pleasant men who were crusty once a year.

They parted about 9.30, and, feeling resonant with wine and warmth, Nick walked over to Fifth Avenue and took the bus downtown. The farther down the avenue he rode, the blacker the night seemed to become, and out of all proportion to the commonplace little trip, he began to feel like a voyager returning from a city of light to a hillside cave. I had too much wine, he thought. But whatever the cause, he didn't feel like going home. He felt as if he had left a package somewhere; or forgotten his address; or was uneasy because he wanted to scratch a place that did not yet quite itch.

He usually got off at Eighth Street, but tonight he continued to the bottom of Washington Square then got out and walked south along Sullivan Street. It was a part of town where he would not ordinarily have chosen to walk, but he had strolled there frequently with Del in the past few months, sometimes down to an Italian restaurant they liked, and he felt rather comfortable here. At Third Street, attracted by the gaudiness of the night-club fronts, he turned. A few doors in, he saw a cheap, slapdash sign on a place called The

Solid Beat, announcing a special limited engagement of some jazz musicians. The last one mentioned was Gene Meredith, Piano. Nick went in and down the narrow stairs.

It was a long cellar, mercifully hung with cloth that absorbed some of the sound. At the far end, on the other side of a number of tiny tables in the candle-stained gloom, the band sat, bathed in apologetic light from a few weak spots. At the piano, holding himself straight as a rifle, looking like an angel out of Blake gone slumming, was Gene. His large hands, unwatched, moved nimbly.

Nick ordered a Scotch and water, then sipped and listened to the music, which was like an uneven prism revolving under blinding light. As his eyes adjusted he picked out Myrna's frizzy blonde head at a front table, and he huddled back into his private shadow, trying to feel like an amiable philosopher who had slipped into a humble tavern to watch the young at their sport, a visitor full of content, meaning only well and seeking nothing.

He stayed just long enough to finish his drink, while the music zoomed around him, and as he sat there, he found, himself thinking: I am a man who was in love. It is very natural to regret the passing of something beautiful. But I mustn't cheat. I must remember the whole story. It was not all beautiful. I must try to remember all of it.

Next night he went to a movie on Eighth Street and when he came out, he saw Kenneth across the street, walking away from him, then stopping to look in a bookshop window. Nick's first impulse was to turn the other way and hurry; he didn't want to talk to him, to have to cede and concede. But then he thought: I want to know. What's worse, I know I want to know.

Quickly he crossed over and came up behind Kenneth. "Surely not," he said. "Historical novels! Not you."

"Not me is right," said Kenneth. "I was just admiring her anatomy. How are you, Nick? How have you been?"

"Oh, pretty good. Considering that I just came out of that." He jerked his thumb back at the movie marquee.

"So did I."

"Good Lord. Another illusion gone."

"I love good Westerns," said Kenneth. "Where else can you see Good and Evil and be sure which one is going to win? In colour. What in hell were you doing there?"

"I don't know. I guess I like horses." He had been bored and tired; the good book he was reading had grown fuzzy. He hadn't wanted to go to bed early, and the only way he could stay awake was to go to a movie. "How are you, Kenneth? Are you in a rush? Come and have a drink."

"I am yours, *sahib*."

They walked down to a quiet bar on Washington Place. Kenneth was one of the few tall men with whom Nick did not feel towered over. Kenneth's height was somehow more a part of his character than his physique.

As they walked it struck Nick as extremely odd that this fellow was seeing Del now and he was not. It was strange to be meeting her through another person, as it were; strange that this girl who had been so close and so much to him was now at one remove.

They settled into a booth and ordered drinks. Nick decided that subtlety or obliqueness would be silly with Kenneth.

"How's Del?" he asked.

"Pretty well, I guess. I had a letter from her yesterday."

"A letter? Where is she?"

"Don't you know?"

"No, Kenneth. I haven't seen her since just after Christmas. Surely you heard."

"Yes," said Kenneth soberly and friendly, "I heard, Nick. I heard about it. But, well, I didn't know you were so completely out of touch."

"I have been. Did she go back to California?"

"No; to Washington. She quit her job the day after the funeral and lit out for Washington."

"Wait a minute. One thing at a time." It was like opening one's eyes in the morning and finding the room full of strangers. "Whose funeral? What's been going on, anyway?"

"I'm sorry. You really have been out of touch."

"I said so," he replied a bit testily.

"Muriel's. Muriel Voss. You remember her?"

"I certainly do. What happened to her?"

"She knocked herself off. On New Year's Eve," said Kenneth. Clearly the only way he could talk about it was flatly.

First Nick felt irritation: almost as if it had been rude of this segment of his life to have undergone so many changes without informing him. He was jealous of Kenneth's better knowledge. "That's terrible. That's really terrible. I guess you all knew she was in a bad way, but . . ."

"She took over two dozen pills. She said New Year's Eve brought the whole thing to a head. She felt lonelier than ever, and there was a whole big new year coming straight at her. Just before she went under, she telephoned Del. And Del called me. I was just on my way to call for her—we had a date, I rang the police and then we both chased up there. But it was too late. They couldn't bring her around."

"And that's how you spent New Year's Eve."

"On a bench in a waiting-room in Bellevue."

Why should he have been there? thought Nick. I'm glad I'm free now, but what right had he to be with her? Oh, that's just silly greed you can't have it every way.

"What was Del wearing?"

Tall Kenneth was hunched over the table. He looked up under his unkempt hair. "I guess that question has a meaning I don't know. A sweater and skirt, I guess."

"Was she—did she take it badly?"

"No. As a matter of fact, she scared the hell out of me, if you must know. She acted as if there are always some who fall by the way and it's too bad but that's how it is. As if there were nothing else for Muriel and maybe she was better off now."

"That was all self-protection."

"No; not all. Some, but not all. Del has a funny attitude about some things. Underneath the fluttering wings, there's a strong streak of, well, non-sentiment."

"Damn you, don't tell me about the streaks in Del, thought Nick savagely. "Well, anyway. She quit her job!"

"A few days later."

"Did she say why?"

"Her sister's husband—the one in the Navy—was transferred to Washington and she decided to go down and stay with them for a while. She's mad about that sister."

"Yes. I know. Um—this is none of my business, but I do want to know how she is: have you seen her since she left? Have you been down there?"

"No." Kenneth grinned, almost sheepishly. "She indicated no. She wanted to go off for a while. Not by herself so much, but away from what she'd been in. Including me."

"I see."

"Yes. I guess you do."

Nick gave him a cigarette, took one himself and lighted both.

"Thanks." Kenneth puffed. "But there's more to the saga, Nick. All is not over. She just wrote that she's got another job. This will surprise you. With a friend of yours."

"Who?"

"Liza Benedict, the singer."

Nick felt like Van Winkle. Twenty years had passed. "Do you mind telling me how that happened?"

"Benedict is singing at one of the big hotels and Del took her sister to hear her. Your other friend, the cartoonist—what's his name——"

"Beliveau."

"—was in the audience——"

"He always is."

"—and saw her and asked the two girls to have supper with them later. Benedict needed a sort of personal secretary, I gather, and she offered the job to Del. Del's worked for theatrical people before——"

"One. A movie star. I thought she didn't like it much."

"Well, she likes these people. And she likes their friends. The whole milieu."

"She *does*?"

"Yes. Our Del."

Ours, eh? thought Nick. Neither mine nor yours now.

"Well."

They finished their drinks.

"What have *you* been doing?" asked Kenneth.

"Oh, working along. I had a bout of flu that knocked me for a loop and I went down to Cuba for a week. That's about all.

They ordered fresh drinks. Nick took time to let things stop whirling and settle into a landscape, revised but steady.

"Kenneth," he said, "are you in love with Del?"

Kenneth looked up quite amiably, as if to say: You can't shock a poet. "That's a fair question. I don't quite know the answer. Oh, of course, I love a lot of things in her. I'd despise anyone who didn't. But I sometimes feel that Del is too much *with* me, she's alongside me, I can't see her. It's like those banquettes in restaurants where you have to sit next to the person you're with and you can't really look at her. She probably thinks the same about me. Anyway, she thinks of me as a sort of only just possibly sexy brother. The kid in the sweatshirt and sneakers."

"She thinks you're a remarkable fellow."

"She's right."

"And gifted."

"Certainly. Nick, old thing, I've even written a poem about *you*. At least, you're in it."

"I'm not sure," said Nick, "but that may have been very impertinent of you." Kenneth grinned. "What's it called?" asked Nick.

"'Through Manhattan with Gun and Camera.' It's going to be in *The Manbatter*."

"Oh, yes. I heard about that. Congratulations. Well, I'll read it. And I may sue."

"Good. I can use a little attention. Nick, may I just intrude this much? I've been thinking a lot about you and Del. Do you know, it's insane, but I was almost sorry when I heard."

Nick put his hand on Kenneth's shoulder. "All right. That's enough. I like you, you know that. I always will. But that's enough, Kenneth."

Kenneth grinned again. "I don't mind being young around you, Nick. That's a compliment."

"Accepted. With thanks."

"But why did you ask me whether I love her?"

"Because I care what happens to her."

"Is that all?"

Nick raised a warning finger. "You're 'understanding' me, Kenneth."

"Sorry; lost my head."

They talked about other things and they finished their drinks. Nick offered Kenneth a third drink, but he declined. As they rose and put on their coats, Nick asked, "I suppose they're off on a long tour, Liza Benedict and company?"

"As a matter of fact, they're heading this way. Philadelphia for a week, and then she opens here at the Salle Montmartre on the twenty-fifth. Week from Tuesday."

A uniformed club porter led Nick up the wide, curving mahogany stair to the second floor. The clubhouse, about fifteen years old, was redolent with what Nick called "new antiquity"; it was striving desperately to achieve tradition and atmosphere in a hurry, like a wealthy suburban community. There was plenty of money to spend here, and the club had imported old paintings, old panelling and old furniture. Nick felt sure that the porter had been imported, too.

In a private sitting-room, Jess Buchanan, complete with little bow tie and big, curved, fuming pipe, was waiting with his back to a discreet fire.

"'Lo, Nick," he said, taking his pipe from his mouth with his left hand and elevating it in salute. The porter bowed and

withdrew, and Jess came forward to shake hands. "Nice to see you, my boy. And looking so trim."

"Thanks, Jess. I feel trim, thanks, and it's a pleasant change."

"Had a bad time of it last month, I guess."

"Well, washed out. And I'm not used to feeling that way."

"I know. You're usually very much the opposite."

"This is a pleasant room."

"Not bad, I guess, is it?" There was a small table attractively set for two. There was a sideboard with bottles and glasses and an ice bucket. "What's your pleasure?"

"Scotch, please, with some ice and a little water."

They sat with their drinks in two good leather club chairs. Nick lit a cigarette and leaned back further. The moment was made.

"Well, Nick," said Buchanan, "shall we take it easy and work along to it or shall we get it out of the way and then enjoy our dinner?"

Nick smiled, almost respectfully. "Let's get it out of the way, Jess."

Now came the triumph. He and Del had split on this matter; no, the mere prospect of it had split them. She had assumed that only one choice was possible for him, and if that was what she had assumed, if his mere consideration of it had terrified her so, weren't they better off apart? But now came the victory.

"Jess," he said, "I've thought it over very carefully. I suppose the time I've taken indicates that. And, with thanks, I've decided not to accept."

"Uh-huh," said Buchanan at once, nodding, "Why not, Nick?"

Why not. Well, certainly not just to prove something to someone who was out of his life. Certainly not because there was any truth in the things she had said about the offer. But because freedom had been the continuing chord in his life ever since they had parted: release and choice and possibility. And to take this job was to choose too quickly, discarding too soon every other avenue that was there or that he could hew.

Worse than anything else, increasingly through 'the last free month Buchanan's offer had reeked of return, of going backward, of putting on again a garment faded and worn, no matter how lavishly Jess trimmed it with ermine.

He was still too young to do something so tired and old. That was it, in sum. It had nothing to do with Del. Even though she might think so when she heard about it.

"It's a good offer, Jess. Generous. Worthwhile. There are a hundred designers in New York who would give an arm for it."

"I know it's a good offer, Nick," Buchanan said tolerantly. "Why don't you want it?"

He had the lie and the half-truth ready. "Well, first, I'm not at all sure I want to leave Parlier just yet. And, second, if I go out as an independent, I'm not sure I want to tie myself to packaging so thoroughly. I guess that's about it. The money was fine."

"Mm-hm. Any other offers, Nick?"

"No. It's not that, Jess. And one thing I must make clear. I realize that the whole thing is a tremendous compliment to me and I appreciate it."

"I didn't do it to compliment you, Nick." Buchanan pursed his lips around the pipe-stem and stared into the fire.

"Of course not. It was a business offer. You thought I could be of use to you. But whether you like it or not, I feel complimented. And I'm grateful."

"Mm-hm." Buchanan grunted. "I'll push myself one more notch. Want to take a little more time? Want to reconsider it?"

"Jess, with all thanks, I don't think there's any point in it. We might as well cut clean."

"Mm-hm."

Nick watched him stare into the fire and wondered whether he was surprised or disappointed or angry; or all three. All three, Nick decided. Well, he was a little surprised himself. He supposed that the decision to refuse had been lying dormant under his bland assumption that sooner or later he would

accept. He supposed it had been galvanized by the news from Kenneth the night before. It was only imagination, he knew, that Del had been trying to prove something to him (or to anybody) by accepting the job with Liza, to prove that she could take a step forward and manage people who had once frightened her. Not fact: sheer imagination. But imagination could be as potent as fact. Was it fact or imagination that he had made his choice tonight to prove something to Del? It had to be imagination: he was free of Del.

Buchanan was silent.

"Jess," Nick said, "shall we have dinner together? Or would it be easier all around if I cleared out?"

The kindly country storekeeper was only a shadow in Buchanan now. Another man was resident. "Maybe that would be better, Nick," he said, looking at him. "Why should we force it? Bad for my digestion."

"Certainly," said Nick. He rose and stubbed out his cigarette. "I'll run along. Do we shake hands?"

Buchanan was calm, but furious. He put out his hand like a dead weight. "If you want. Good luck, Nick," he said without much conviction and without getting up.

The next two days reminded Nick of those times when he had flown back from far places and had had to wait for his mind to catch up with him. The sensation he had missed on his return from Cuba suffused him now. He had done with Buchanan what he really wanted to do, he was sure of that; but he had only suspected beforehand that he might do it; there had been no conscious resolve. It took a couple of days to adjust himself completely to the picture of M. L. Nicholas, Non-Peerless.

He felt giddy, almost giggly, in those two days, like a boy who has done something daring and defies reproof. Normal responses to stimuli seemed lacking in him. Entering the office felt different, travelling home, drinking Scotch, the texture of beef in his mouth, trivia and urgencies seemed

separated from him by invisible coatings of plastic. The realisation of what his choice meant was lucid in his head, but the person he had become because of it seemed oddly suspended. In a kind of dry dock. A secret dry dock because he continued to work and function, even went to a poker party at Sam Rinaldi's on Thursday night and won seventeen dollars; but he could never really believe at any moment of the day that he was really where he was, doing, talking, hearing, mingling.

I suppose, he thought, I am intoxicated with change. The paradoxical fact is that by not going to Peerless I have implemented that change. Some kind of large movement, of great alteration in my life is now incumbent upon me. After all I didn't refuse to go backward with Jess merely to stay where I am; I didn't free myself from the obligations of a demanding love merely to be lonely. I am roiled up. I must move. I came back to New York without plan, as far as work was concerned. I drifted into Parlier's shop simply because I was asked. Now I don't think that's enough.

He wished he had someone to talk to. There was only Eve; and he was afraid that "only Eve" was no misstatement. She would be warm and sympathetic, and *laissez faire* would prevail. It would be a very comfortable evening. He would tell her about Buchanan and she would say, "Whatever you think best, darlin'," and he would feel cradled and comfortable. Valuable, of course. But was he now looking, above all, for comfort? "

Even this self-analysis was a new experience to him. Now he wondered whether his aversion to it had not been a kind of laziness. Maybe it's been wasteful not to analyse, he thought, chuckling. I'm too interesting to miss. I'm especially interesting right now.

It was indeed as if he were a bit drunk, continuously and exhilaratingly. He felt puissant and immense. And he was quite curious about what would happen. Like a drunk, too, he could think of caution only as a perhaps necessary nuisance.

[3]

HE was wrong about Eve. She said the words that he expected, or something very like them, but she conveyed a quite different sentiment.

They were having dinner at Julio's, leisurely and wine-woven, remembering Varadero and comparing notes on readjustment to the cold workaday world. After the soup plates had been cleared, after the waiter had served the Chablis and returned the bottle to the bucket, Nick said, "And I saw Buchanan this week. We had a dinner date on Wednesday. Not dinner, just the date."

"How'd that happen?"

"He invited me to his club. Private dining-room, small fire. Looked like a setting for the Duke and the Chorus Girl. Then we had a little talk over drinks and I told him that I had finally decided not to accept. He didn't take it very well. He looked so upset that I didn't see any point in pushing ahead with the dinner. Neither did he, as he was quick to admit." He laughed.

"Honey," she said, "are you teasin'?"

"Why, no. Not in the slightest."

She seemed to sense reproof. "All I mean, Nick, is that I'm surprised. I surely never guessed you weren't goin' to take it."

For some reason he guarded against saying that he hadn't quite guessed it himself. "I battled it out right to the end in my mind, and that's what I came up with."

"You are a deep one."

"Why?"

"All that time down in Cuba I never would have thought you were battlin' anything out. I thought you were sort of like a boat drifting into port with the tide."

"Really?" He wondered why that irritated him.

"But it's your business, of course, honey. You know your own affairs best."

"Well, I have to kid myself that I do."

"I guess things must be goin' real good with Parlier."

"Not bad. I like him personally. There are things about the work itself that chafe a bit."

"And would those things have been worse with Buchanan?"

"No; some of them might not have existed at all."

"Well, then," she said and stopped. She sipped her wine, then she said, "I'll confess to just this much disappointment, Nick. It spoils the picture of the wrong bein' righted. The woodcutter's son. I liked to think of you goin' back there top of the heap."

He stared at her, again transfixed not by what she had said but by the incredibility that two members of the same race, she and Del, who lived and worked and ate and throve in the same decade on the same planet, could see the same phenomenon so differently.

"Yes," he said; "that would have been nice. But it would have been a tiny temporary thrill. After the victory parade, I'd have had to get off my horse and stay there."

Dinner slipped on. They talked of other things. As they sat with their coffee, picking at a bowl of fruit, she said, as if finishing a phrase she had left dangling, "I suppose about that job, Nick, it doesn't really matter. I mean, it's not only your own business, but in a way I really don't care, honey. So long as you're satisfied. I guess none of it really matters in the long run. I guess it's just not the job part of people that interests me much."

I must be mad, he thought. Before this, I was disturbed

because of her point of view, and now I'm disturbed because she doesn't have one.

"People fuss too much," she said. "The more I travel on, the thing I'm interested in most is no raw edges. What I think about most these days is my nerve-ends. I want to live with nice people in an office and I want to get home at night without my stomach bein' upset. And as long as there's enough money to give me a nice house where I can see the people I like and wear a few things that don't make me look too plain, why, that's it, I guess. And I surely don't think that's a little. I think it's a lot, as this world goes."

I *must* be mad, thought Nick. Why else am I reminded of Iris? Why do I see plateaux—stretching endlessly?

"*Laissez faire*," he said. "Right?"

"I'll drink to that, any time," she said raising the last of her wine. She drained her glass. "Honey," she said, smiling gently, "I got the feeling that you're not agreein' with me much tonight. But there's no point in my sayin' what I don't think, is there?"

"Don't be silly. I like you because you're Eve." He said, "My honest friend."

They went to the second and more interesting half of a double feature, and all through the picture, Nick was scored by a kind of resentment at being cumbered with her tonight. She had seen the truth of his feelings but that didn't alter them. He felt now as if he had speeded past her in a car and was looking back; she was the same but she was different, his motion gave her a different quality. The world changed when the viewer moved. He was no longer interested in protecting his nerve-ends; he was perfectly willing to risk bruising them so long as he could keep them tingling.

They strolled back to her apartment house chatting like the best friends in the world. At the door she said, "Nick, honey, you won't mind if I don't ask you up for a drink. I did a lot of chores today and I got a lot more tomorrow. I'm really a little beat."

"Oh, of course, Eve." He nodded formally, enjoying this decoy between two people who had shared intimacy. "I probably shouldn't have kept you up so late." He knew she was telling him that she wasn't interested in him this evening and he liked her for exercising the option.

"Not a bit of it. I had a lovely time. I'm givin' a little supper party when my sister comes up from Savannah end of next week, Nick. I'd like for you to come. I'll call you."

She was saying "No" tonight, but she wanted them to leave each other as friends; and she had not said that he could not call before next week. But suddenly, with a warm rush, he saw the page of the photograph album turning. There was a parting ahead of him with Eve, a parting he would have to make.

"Thank you, dear." He kissed her briefly and she went in.

He walked through the lotion-like cool air from Gramercy Park to Charles Street, walked up his stairs and slammed the door behind him, then walked across the living-room and almost into the far wall.

He said aloud, "This has gone far enough." He laughed. "Pun intended."

The furious butterflies, the insistent champagne that had swirled in him ever since his return from Cuba had to be obeyed. Had to be investigated and obeyed. He was on a high thin bridge arching over a tremendous misty chasm. He had to see what was on the other side.

He also had to understand what had put him in this dissatisfied and expectant state.

He supposed that, on an occasion like this, the protocol of introversion demanded that he stay up all night and try to think it out. "It will be easy for me," he said smiling. "I can follow the rules. I'm much too excited to sleep."

He lighted his first cigarette, sat and stared into the cold hearth. After he had stubbed out the butt, he reached idly for a book. Consciously or not, he had pulled down the bound volume of magazines that Del had once been reading in the Wank office when he surprised her. And which she had

remembered so bitterly well. He leafed through the pages, and arteries seemed to reunite. I told her the truth, he thought; it has not been a toboggan slide since Chicago. I believed I was, the best I could be. But maybe now I'm being someone else, someone old and new. . . .

Like a boat drifting into port, Eve had said. How ugly it had sounded. And how unobjectionable, virtually flattering it would have sounded a couple of months ago. Obviously he no longer wanted to drift, into port, or anywhere else. What was worse (what had hurt most), he didn't want to be so damned predictable.

I am a man, he thought, and thought it that way for the first time. I am quite possibly a creative man. *Everything* is possible for me. (I wonder what that damned poem of Kenneth's says.) I feel as if a partial anaesthesia were wearing off and I had sense again in my extremities. I feel collegiately protean and capable. I will not behave according to the Buchanan-LoPresto-Reynolds Syndrome. At the very least I will not drift into it.

Now, he thought, what is it I really want? There must be something bubbling beneath the surface; that's the only explanation of the butterflies, the champagne. What has tickled me awake?

The answer may have come while he was asleep. For, in spite of himself, he must have slept; he saw the first slow ripple of dawn, decided to watch the sun come up, and next saw that it was eight o'clock and sunny. It all may have resolved deep in a far chamber of his mind during those three or four sleeping hours.

He went inside and brushed his teeth, shaved, showered and put on fresh clothes. Then he proceeded to Grand Central Station through the quiet streets dotted with people carrying thick Sunday papers, and took a train up to Westchester County. During the trip he did some figuring on the back of an envelope.

Then he thought, "You know, she is a person, too. She can

be approached and considered and talked to as a human being. Why does she have to be a Nameless Shadow, an influence to be resisted? She lives."

He was thinking of his mother.

In the suburban station he found a telephone booth and a local directory. He looked up Ferdy Bates's number and rang him.

A child answered. "Go away. We're sleeping."

Nick was startled into a long laugh. These were practically the first words addressed to him in ten hours and they seemed surprisingly wonderful. "Is *everybody* sleeping?"

"Except me."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm reading."

"You're a fine fellow. Well, when your father wakes up, will you tell him——"

He heard a man approaching. "Who is it, Ronnie?"

Ronnie didn't know, Daddy.

Ferdy took the phone and said in a drowsy, unstretched voice, "Yes?"

"Ferdy, this is Nick."

"Hnm?"

"Nick."

"Oh." Obviously Ferdy was not too swiftly awakened to be embarrassed; he remembered their last conversation. He said meekly, "Hi, Nick. Surprise."

"Yeah, sure is. Listen, Ferdy, I'm down at the railroad station."

"What railroad station?"

"Your railroad station."

"For God's sake."

"I've come up to see you."

"Well, gee!" He was awake now. "Well." He started again. "Well, is there a taxi there? If not, I'll come down and get you."

"You come down, Ferdy, but I don't want to go out to the house."

"Why not?"

"I want to talk to you. I don't want to see Kay and the children today. It would mix things up. It would mix me up. Give them my best, but I just want to see you today."

"All right. I don't get it, but if you say so——"

"I'd appreciate it. I saw a diner across the street that said 'Open twenty-four hours'. Meet me there, will you, Ferdy, as soon as you can."

"O.K. Take me a little while, though."

Nick went into the diner, sat in a booth and ordered coffee. In about fifteen minutes Ferdy turned up in sports jacket, flannel shirt, and canvas coat, unshaven but with the parting in his hair flawless. He looked somewhat stiff in his informal clothes. Nick wondered whether it was because it was compulsory suburban week-end uniform or simply because Ferdy was being guarded.

"For God's sake," Ferdy said again, and took off his coat.

"Let's have some breakfast," said Nick. "Big one."

They ordered grapefruit, waffles with sausage, and coffee.

"The reason I've come up here," said Nick, "is to tell you a couple of things. The first is, I think I'm going crazy."

"Well—so far, who am I to disagree?"

"All of a sudden I want to do a lot of things I've been thinking about for a long time. Only it's as if I didn't know I was thinking about them and now I do and I seem to be able to move."

"Like what, Nick?"

"First of all, I suppose I ought to tell you I'm not going with Peerless. I've turned down the offer."

"Oh." Ferdy stared at him, almost glared. Nick thought he could see running through Ferdy's mind a reluctance to admit that the news meant anything to him, ingrained self-defence of the ego, then the realization that with Nick he was past pretence. "Well, no use kidding. That's a breather for me, Nick. I've got to think it's good news."

"Wait a minute. You haven't heard the whole wild story.

I'm not staying with Parlier either. I'm going to start my own place. I want more control over my work and I want the chance to originate things."

"That's swell, Nick. Really swell. I wish you all the——"

"Will you stop interrupting? I want a man with me, a man who I know can help me with design when I want it, but who can do more on the business end, the contact work. I want you."

"Nick."

"Don't tell me about Peerless. You know your head is on the block there. I can't pay you what they're giving you but you know that job can't last."

"I wasn't thinking about that, Nick." He seemed to blush slightly with incomprehension. "Can we slow it down a little, Nick? Let me see it all. You want me with you in your own new place?"

"That's it."

"Like—like before?"

"Not exactly. That was a partnership. This would be my firm. But I want you doing more or less the same work."

"Why? Why me?"

"Because I know you. Because I know how we work together. Because I want someone I can trust. Because, in a way, we're both bouncing off Peerless. Because—well, it just seemed the most inevitable thing in the world." Because, in my own new excited way, I feel I owe it to you, he thought. *Noblesse oblige*. The *noblesse* of those who wake up happy on Sunday mornings.

Ferdy frowned at him and swallowed. "Nick, after—after everything that's happened?"

"After what?"

"Well, when we broke up, some people might have thought that—well, you know, that I——"

"That you screwed me."

Ferdy's face froze. Nothing changed. It just froze. Nick thought: Have I been too blunt? Is it too far for him to come back?

"Gee!" said Ferdy after a moment. "That's only about the third time in my life I ever heard you use a dirty word." He said, "All right. If that's what they said. Then why do you want now to——?"

"Because if it's true, you're the one man in the world I can trust."

Ferdy shook his head thoughtfully. "It's not easy."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm a human being, too, Nick. I've had my reasons for what I've done, I've done my own talking to myself before and after. Besides," he said, "all this is happening so fast."

"You want time to think it over?"

"No. At least, not weeks. Not even days. It's not so much thinking it over. It's just—it's just not the kind of thing that happens."

"Nothing in my life lately is the kind of thing that happens. Come on in, Ferdy. We'll have some fun. May even make some money. A lot of money. How about it?"

"No, Nick. I don't think so."

"Oh, but listen——"

"You said it yourself just now. Suppose you did think that about what I did, about how we broke up. Suppose you thought it gave you a kind of whip-hand."

"Ferdy. For Pete's sake. Do you think that's why I chased all the way up here today? To get a half-nelson on you?"

Ferdy paused. "Maybe not. Maybe not. I've only been talking to you ten minutes, and I'm still . . . well, maybe not."

I foresaw this from only one point of view, thought Nick. But now Ferdy is in it, with his own eyes and brain, his own secrets. Now I am remembering all the things that made us friends in the first place.

"Ferdy. I've told you nothing but truth. Levelling. Tell me some truth, Ferdy. What's on your mind?"

Ferdy held him in his dagger-blue eyes before he spoke. "All right. I don't like being picked up, Nick. Out of the

gutter. I made a phone call to you a couple of months ago. I was drunk. And scared. I'm still scared, but I don't drink any more. I haven't had a drink since that night. I don't like being picked up."

"Ferdy, I had to take the chance that you'd feel this way and then get over it. The only alternative was not to talk to you at all, and I couldn't do that—I need you."

"I'm broke. I'm just as broke as I was in December, if not more so. A man who's absolutely broke has to consider where he moves just as much as a rich man. More, maybe. Because he's stripped to only one asset, the most important. I've been finding that out these nights, about 4 a.m."

"Yes. I know."

"No, you don't. You haven't the foggiest damned idea what I'm talking about. Everything's gone right for you your whole life. Silver spoon, beautiful wife, good job after good job. No hitch. Now you've decided to make this move and you reach out to pick me off the tree, and I'm supposed to fall easy. Without any fuss."

"Ferdy, we all have to live inside our own skins. Have to do the best with what we find there. I'm not saying I haven't had it easier than lots of people, lots of ways. All I'm saying is that I'm coming to you now honestly."

"I know what else you're thinking . . . you could tell me at least one time when you didn't win out and I was the reason." Nick started to speak but Ferdy went on: "Well, that was me. I did it. The same fellow who's sitting here right now. I'm not saying I'd ever do a thing like that again but I'm never going to apologize for it, either," he said firmly, a bit hotly. "I did it, being me where I came from, where I was at the time and where I wanted to go. I don't say I've been specially happy about it, but I'm the one who's lived with it, and that's that. You understand?"

"Yes," said Nick, meekly, happily. He realized now how dreadful it would have been if Ferdy had apologized. It would have made a future between them impossible.

"O.K., then," said Ferdy brusquely. "You still making your offer?"

"I certainly am." This is a man I once loved, he thought, and I may be going to love him again. My God, if I had been Ferdy and had done what he felt he had to do, and endured what followed after, could I have come through it to this moment with his pride? It *has* been much easier for me, thinking I was so damned right.

"Ferdy," he said, "believe this, I'm not turning the other cheek. Believe that I hate you, if you want to. Although I don't—not any more. I want you with me, because I need you.* You're a good designer. I know what makes the back of your neck crickle in design, and you know the same about me. Besides, you can do what I can't do: you can sell. You can sell the pants off me. I'd much rather have you take a presentation of mine to a client than do it myself. You're the man who can really put us in business. I can't do it alone. You probably had a lot more to do with the success of the old firm than I was ever willing to admit, especially after we broke up. All right. You've got to move now. So, for my own reasons, do I. Let's cross 'em all up. Come back with me."

The grapefruit arrived. The waitress departed.

Ferdy clutched his spoon. "I don't think you hate me. If I did, all bets would be off. Because that's what I'm saying, Nick. I could only do it as—as friends."

A beam seemed to be opening in Nick like the iris of a camera. He grinned. "Eat your grapefruit. We're in business."

Ferdy managed to get a piece of the fruit on his spoon. It took him forever. But Nick knew why.

"One thing, Nick. Like I said, I don't have a dime."

"Neither do I. Not much, anyway."

"What do we do?"

"I'm going to borrow the money. From my mother. You know something, Ferdy? She's rich."

"I know she's rich. Didn't you?"

"Probably, but I never said so—just like that. I'm going

to write her today and make her a business proposition. She'll phone me tomorrow and offer me twice as much as a gift. I'll have to fight her off, to keep her down to what I ask for and to get her to sign the loan papers or whatever they are. But I can do it. I can face her and do it. Why in the world *can't* I? I don't have to keep scurrying away from her all my life as if that were the only way to be honest."

"She's a powerful woman, your mother, Nick. In her own, neat, delicate way."

"I know. But I can handle her. Now."

"Maybe you can, I guess we've all changed. *You* sure have." Ferdy seemed to expand, to sit up straighter. "You want to hear something? I'm *hungry*. Want to hear something else? I'd like to call Kay."

"First, let's get a few details straight." The waitress cleared the grapefruit rinds and brought the main dishes, and their fragrance was curiously touching. "Ah, Jeanie with the light brown waffles."

Ferdy cackled, loudly, out of all proportion to the jape; and Nick grinned.

"Boy," said Ferdy as he applied butter and syrup, "look at them. The waffles of the century. Nick," he said as he busied himself with his plate, "one more thing. I'm not going to forget—all this."

Nick knew they were bound closer now than they ever had been by youth and audacity and success. "All right," he said casually: "Neither will I. So what?"

"You *knew* what I mean," said Ferdy as he cut the end off a sausage. He was quiet a moment, sawing away, then he glanced up with a curious smile. And Nick saw him suddenly handsome again—the same face he had met in the Laurent bar, but now that he felt different about Ferdy it seemed luminous and reliable. "Nick, what brought all this on? I'm not complaining," Ferdy added lightly, "but what brought it on?"

"Damned if I know," said Nick, aware somehow that he was lying.

[4]

INSISTENT sunshine clawed frantically through the trees as the train raced back. But he didn't mind, he didn't pull down the shade. He felt like a returning captain riding through the streets of his city, the people pressing forward to catch at his cloak and trappings.

Well, he thought, easy. It's still just old Marion Blessed Nicholas. Industrial designer. Who will shortly be off salary.

Ferdy and he had talked through three more cups of coffee and had drawn up a plan of operation, including the kinds of work they would seek or originate first and why, the size of the staff they would need, the optimum location and office space, a rough idea of budget. Nick's mind had felt glistening and bright through it all, yet through it all, functioning as well as he had been, he had found himself thinking: What *really* brought me here?

It was as if he had been pushed through a door into this situation. He could handle it now that he was ~~here~~, he was even glad to be in the midst of it. But what or who had pushed him?

He had set out for Westchester that morning, not as the result of long consideration about Ferdy, but as if the decision had been a *fait accompli* born whole. Going up there was a kind of Canossa, he felt he had deserved it. There was also an irony, a Tolstoyan aptness about it. But none of these was a sound reason for making a business decision; and they were certainly not things he could tell Ferdy. When Ferdy had pressed him,

he had been forced to think of reasons: true but not primary.

Underneath the fact that I do need him (he thought) and can work with him now, why did I choose Ferdy? The *first* reason.

To show her.

She may never hear of it, yet it's to show her!

Why, man alive (he thought), if you look at it honestly you know that's what has brought on all the intoxication of these past few weeks, the whole feeling of wrenching loose, of afflatus, of growing new limbs like a Hindu god. All of it has been to prove, to show, to boast.

All because of the quarrel with Del. The bomb had been in him, waiting, ever since then; and something about Eve, the ease of being with her, her assumptions about him had lighted the fuse. He would not be predictable. He would not be assigned his groove. He would show them all. And especially Del.

Oh, he wished he could see her face when she heard, when she learned that the fat cat had kicked over the cream, had gnawed through its leash and gone out to hunt. Would the brown eyes stare, would the quick little mouth make an "O", would one hand abstractedly push up the hair beside her temple? He wished he could see.

Just as he began to feel like gloating, the train plunged into the tunnel and as the light swept away, the dark swept the pride out of him and left him lonely.

He simply wanted to see her face. At that moment or whenever. The demanding girl. The girl whose love had forced old dusty muscles in him to rouse and stir. The pest. The responsibility. No wonder he had had fears about her. Every iota of his somnolent self had resisted being awakened, like a sleeper clinging to sleep when someone tugs at his shoulder.

And (you can speak frankly, he thought, no one is listening) it was she who had been working in him these past weeks. Not like a puppet-master at the strings but like an insistent voice, a demon in his ear, an elixir.

This was clear to him now; and suddenly he felt stupid and frightened.

He walked through Grand Central, past the entrance to the Oyster Bar and Restaurant. Del had once told him that she came all the way over here from Broadway for lunch because the stools at the counter were low enough for her to keep her feet on the ground.

He walked out into the day, and the return of sunlight wiped away the fright and loneliness and left him with only one stripped, overwhelming emotion: impatience. He felt that time was sliding fast, that something was moving away and might be missed, that he had dallied and now he had to hurry. He had waited too long: and now he had to hurry or lose it.

Lose what? he thought again. Hurry where? He still didn't know. And yet he felt such terrible haste, almost panic, that even as he hailed a taxi, he wanted to abandon it and run home through the streets.

[5]

THE telephone seemed to him the biggest thing in the apartment. He had been thinking of it so intensely in the taxi that by the time he climbed the stairs and opened the door, it had swollen in his mind to dominate the room like a Surrealist nightmare. He felt that he was going to its clutches rather than picking it up.

Without stopping to remove his coat he got out his directory, looked up Carter Beliveau's Bucks County number and put in a call. It had occurred to him in the taxi that if Liza had closed in Washington on Saturday and was opening next week in Philadelphia, what could be more logical than that she would be spending the week-end at Carter's farm? And since she liked "others" to be present, what more likely than that her private secretary was with her?

The houseman answered and said he was sorry, Mr. Beliveau had driven up to New York early that morning. Miss Benedict was resting. She couldn't be disturbed.

That was all right, said Nick, and thanked him. He wouldn't have wanted to talk to Liz, anyway. He didn't know her well enough for what he had to ask; or rather, for what he had to seem not to ask.

He called Carter's apartment uptown.

"Yes?" said Carter.

"Carter, it's Nick."

A sharp, indrawn sigh of pleasure. Then, "Dear boy."

"Glad I caught you in. I tried to get you in the country and they told me you had driven up for the day."

"Yes; I had to pick up some things for Liz. I tried to call you this morning, Nick. Twice. You do gad, don't you?"

"Moderately. How've you been, Carter?"

"Languid. Fetchingly languid. And you, my son?"

"I don't know. I think I've got a frenzy on me or St. Vitus's dance or a visitation of a spirit or something."

"How gay. Shall I call back later?"

Nick laughed. "Wouldn't do any good. Carter, I rang just to find out how everything is, how it's going. I haven't seen you in thirty or forty years."

"I know it, dear lad. That's why I rang you. To impart, to impart. First, it was Miami, then Washington. Then Philadelphia and comes soon New York."

"With success, I'm sure."

"Success? They tore the motor out of her taxi and pulled it through the streets."

"I believe every syllable. Carter, I also hear there's a new member of the troupe."

"Oh, then you did hear. That's the chief news I wanted to tell. I wasn't sure you knew. Yes, she's been working for Liz for two weeks. She's down at the farm now. Liz adores her."

"Good."

"She's been around such a short while and we can't imagine a time when she wasn't there."

"She—she's all right? I mean, feeling all right?"

"Oh, yes. She used to be a little like a greyhound straining at the leash, I remember. When I first met her. But now I should say she was—well—relatively unfrantic." • •

"Ah." Bright needles flashed through the air and plunged into him. The impatience gathered and heightened.

"Nick, forgive me. She doesn't talk much about herself and I haven't seen you. I am doubtless dropping bricks by the ton—but whatever was between you, isn't any more, is that right? Forgive me."

"Don't be silly. Let's put it this way. I haven't seen her—well, it's longer than since I saw you last."

"I dare to express regret. Without knowing to whom or for what. I know you and I'm beginning to know her, so I express it."

"Well—um—how is she? She all right?"

"You asked me that before, dear lad. I should perhaps add that—er—she's active these days."

An asp corkscrewed through him. He wanted to reach out and grab. He knew what Carter implied. "Fine. I suppose. Fine."

He halted. Then he did what he had to do. "Carter, are you going back down today? I mean——"

"Nick, old thing, you have filched the idea from my brain. What are you doing now? I mean sort of like *right* now."

"Oh," said Nick, concealing his rapid breathing, "just lolling around waiting for an invitation to Bucks County."

"Well, then!" said Carter triumphantly. "You called just in time. The nick of time, if I may say so."

"Do."

"I'm just about to start back. I had my mittens on when you called. Come. Please come."

"You have just become my host. Thank you. Where and when?" he asked, his forehead strangely warm.

"I'm going out through the Holland Tunnel, right past your place. Can I pick you up in about a half-hour?"

Wings, thought Nick, wings. "O.K. Excellent. I think I can be ready."

The trip down was pleasant and quick. Carter drove somewhat fiendishly but well, and the heated convertible provided a snug mobile cabin for conversation in the middle of the crisp day.

The winter sun was beginning to draw a shadowy bow as they turned into Carter's driveway shortly after four.

"The place looks quite different in winter," said Nick, "but just as nice."

"Liz says the country looks as if it had been X-rayed."

Liza herself opened the door for them. "Well, Nick. How are you, chappie? Nice to see you."

"And you, Miss Liza." He kissed her cheek. "Mm, you always smell so warm and fluffy."

"That will be enough," said Carter. "I'm getting cold out here."

"Carter," she said to him without preamble, "was the black dress ready?"

"Yes, I've got it in the bag."

"Did she fix that bow?"

"Well, I wasn't entirely happy about it but I brought it along. If you don't like it, I can touch it up myself."

"You are a handy one," said Nick.

Carter shrugged. "It was easier to learn how to sew than to go screaming through the streets of Chicago and St. Louis at midnight, looking for dressmakers. Which I have done, too."

"Well, hang it up, will you, hon," said Liza, "before it gets wrinkled. Nick, come inside with me. I'm just about to have my first of the day."

The large fireplace had a large fire in it. As he entered the welcoming room, Nick's eyes moved around it quickly. "Just you and I drinking?" he said.

"And Carter." She was at the sideboard. "Oh, you mean Del. She went over to a cocktail party at Teddy Fox's. Back about nine. Do you know Teddy? My arranger?"

"I don't think so."

"Smartest in the business. And a very nice boy. He has a place up in Solebury, the other side of New Hope. He and Del have been getting rather pal-ly the last few weeks. I think this party was whipped up just for her."

"Oh. Good . . . Good," he repeated, hoping it didn't sound bleak. "But weren't you invited?"

"Oh, sure, I was. Carter, too. But Carter had to go into New York and I'm old-fashioned. I don't go to many parties."

"Don't like them?"

"*Comme ci, comme so-so*," she said with her husky ease.

"but I'm old-fashioned. I don't believe that show people should rub elbows with the public too much. Kills the glamour."

"I see what you mean. 'Why, she likes olives just the same as me.'"

"That's it," she said, handing him his drink. "Too many people in politics and on committees these days. Soon there won't be any more stars. Just celebrities." She lifted her glass. "Happy days."

"And to you, old thing."

Liza fitted a cigarette into her holder. "Incidentally, I've really flipped for that Del. Never had anyone like that around me before. I don't usually like females. But I feel as if I'd known her all her young life."

"Carter says she's doing well at her job."

"Yeah. He's mad about her, too. He even lets her do things he never let anyone else do before—booking trains and hotels and like that."

"That's a vote of confidence, sure 'nough."

Carter joined them soon and they chatted. Nick found out—deviously, he hoped, but you had to move slowly and skillfully if you wanted to deceive Carter—that Teddy Fox was divorced; that he had more than a friendly interest in Del; that she was at least amused by him; and that the party this evening had been relatively impromptu. At any rate Carter hadn't known about it when he invited Nick down.

Nick sipped and answered and asked and smiled and made them smile, liking them but thinking all the while: Am I in time? Or was it too late two months ago?

In one way he was quite proud of the ease with which he sat there and went in to supper with them later and ate enough so as not to provoke comment when he really wanted to shriek or storm out of the house after Del. Control, he thought. (Or age?) Stiff upper lip while the fort is burning.

After dinner Carter said, "A treat tonight, children. Too bad Del had to miss it. Do you remember Oscar Fowler?"

"Vividly," said Nick.

"He has a play on television tonight. Shall we peep and sneer?"

"By all means," said Nick. At least he wouldn't have to talk for a bit.

The television set was encased in wood that matched the panelling of the living-room. Fowler's play was about a reporter who goes to work writing campaign speeches for a political candidate and discovers that the candidate has a brother in prison. Should he reveal it? He meets and falls in love with a girl who takes the same commuters' train every day. She turns out to be the daughter of the rival candidate. (Music stab.) The last fifteen minutes were devoted to considerable walloping of moral issues before everything was settled.

Carter switched off the set and sighed. "Isn't it adorable? So tidy. Where do all the little half-truths go when they die? Why, into mass communications, of course, junior."

"The trouble is," said Liza, "I can never get upset, no matter how tough a jam any of them get into. I just look at my watch and I know that in seventeen minutes or twelve minutes or three minutes, everything's going to be all right."

Nick laughed. "I can forget that once in a while. Like with a good movie. What bothers me is that when I see something good on TV, I always want to go over and tear the damned box apart and let the actors out. I always feel they're trapped."

They had some more coffee and brandy, then Nick looked at his watch and was disturbed to see that it was eleven. An increasing discomfiting feeling had been growing in him for the last hour or so; that Del was avoiding him by not coming home. Liza had said she was expected back about nine.

"I'm getting sleepy," said Liza. "I'm going to toddle, after one more Napoleon."

As Carter poured it for her, he said, "I didn't realize it was quite this late. Liz, did Del go out before I phoned?"

"No," said Liz, "after."

"Oh," said Carter, and didn't look at Nick.

Dee had known he was coming. Nick, though uncomfortable, was grateful to Carter for establishing that. She was very likely staying out deliberately.

Liza finished her drink and went to bed. Carter and he talked. The conversation dawdled. Then it went on again. Then it was twelve.

"How would she be getting back?" asked Nick abruptly.

"Why," said Carter, understanding at once, "I assume Teddy will drive her home. Don't you?"

"But then he'll have to drive all the way back again." Nick got up swiftly. Angrily. "Why don't I save him the trouble?" he said affably. "I'll go after her."

"Do you want to? Yes," said Carter; "you do."

He gave Nick the keys to the convertible and directions to find Teddy's. "Do you want me to phone and say you're coming?"

"Thanks; I think not," said Nick. "I'll take a chance that I won't pass them on the road."

"As you like, dear boy." He turned to the stairs. "I shall now retire."

"Carter," said Nick and twisted the dangling keys in his hand. "Um. You're very nice, you know that?"

"I certainly do," said Carter sternly. "I am just superb and it's high time that every American man, woman and child was aware of it."

Nick smiled. "Good night."

"Good night."

[6]

NICK drove up to New Hope as quickly as he could along the twisting road that traced the river and canal. He tried not to think of himself as galloping through the night to claim a lady, but the decades of his life and of the twentieth century were not quite sufficient to kill all the romanticism in him. After all, he thought, what is the use of being in love, of being as excited and miserable and furious as I am, if it doesn't afford a little romanticism too?

He found Fox's house without much trouble—Carter's directions were perfect—walked up the flagstone path and rang the bell. There were lights on, he could hear the bass notes of a record and some voices.

The door was opened by a young man in a handsome corduroy shirt. He was a trifle taller than Nick; he had black hair cut very short and attractive circles under his eyes. He was built and he moved like a lightweight boxer.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Fox?"

"Yes?"

"Forgive the intrusion. My name is Nicholas. I'm a house guest of Carter Beliveau's."

"Oh. Oh, yes."

"Carter was kind of concerned about Del. That is, about her getting home at this hour without troubling you to make the round trip. So I volunteered to drive over her for her. I hope you don't mind."

A smile, cordial yet faintly antagonistic, touched Fox's eyes and mouth. "Well—come in, won't you?"

"Thank you."

"They were in a narrow hall. It was an old, low-ceilinged house.

"Just throw your coat on that settle if you like."

"Thanks; but I suppose I won't be staying long."

Fox led him down the hall and Nick knew again the feeling of arriving at a party after most of the guests had left. It was like entering a theatre toward the end of a movie; no matter how quick you were, you couldn't understand it all.

At the end of the room Del, in a grey jersey dress with a red collar, sat on a love-seat, her feet tucked under her. On the floor before her sat a grey-haired man and a blond man. Instantly and irrationally Nick hated them.

The room was much smaller than Carter's living-room, but it was another twentieth-century attempt to live in the eighteenth century.

"Del," said Fox, "I think you know this gentleman."

She looked up in mid-sentence—almost in mid-laugh—and halted. Her jaw moved sideways once, and then she said, "Oh, hi, Nick." He had thought she would grow pale; but she didn't. She almost flushed: with pride, he supposed—no doubt feeling that if she had to be surprised by him, she didn't at all mind being surprised in the centre of a group.

"Hello, Del."

He was introduced to the other men, both of whom were mildly tight.

"Mr. Nicholas says Carter is worried about you," said Fox, still with quiet irony.

"What time is it?" She glanced at her watch. "Later than I thought. But so what?"

"Maybe," said Fox to Nick, "you'd like to take off your coat and have a drink."

Nick suddenly felt clumsy and foolish. He had 'stormed over here without anticipating the atmosphere he would

enter. He hadn't assumed that Del would leap to him, but neither did he know what to do now. He would walk over and snatch her up and carry her out. But that extremity would be difficult to live with in the future if he were wrong. Even if he were right.

The only course he could see was not to be irritated. "Thanks very much," he said removing his coat and tossing it on a chair. "Scotch and water, if you don't mind."

As Fox went to get the drink, the grey-haired man on the floor said, "Del's been telling us about Gaya Graves, the movie star. Hilarious. She used to work for her."

"Yes; I know." She was still called Del. He had fixed that on her at any rate; she lived to that extent at least in his continued presence.

"Imitation's absolutely fantastic," said the blond boy. "Marvellous. We've been sitting here for hours screaming at her."

"I've never seen the imitation," said Nick.

"I've been working on it," she said. "I've also learned a few card tricks."

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Nick. "I wouldn't be surprised at anything." He said it so pleasantly, staring at her so hard that she flushed again. She said to the blond boy, "Binky," and held out her empty glass.

"Of course, darling." He leaped to his feet and went to the bar, passing Fox on his way back with Nick's drink.

All this offering and making and serving and drinking of drinks, thought Nick. If it disappeared, we'd lose half the rituals that keep society from flying to pieces. "Thanks."

Fox sat near him and said, "I hear that Del used to work for you out in L.A."

"Yes; that's how we met."

"Was that before or after Gaya Graves?" asked the grey-haired man.

"After."

"Are you in pictures, too?" asked the blond man coming back.

"No, I'm a designer. Industrial and graphics."

"That's interesting," said the blond young man.

"Yes," said Nick.

"Are you visiting in the East?" asked the grey-haired man.

Nick caught Fox's eye and sensed that Fox not only knew the answer to this, he knew a great deal more about him: that Fox knew he had met opposition and was determined to be well-behaved about it. Nick felt a ripple of liking for the man. He wondered exactly how close Fox and Del were.

Maybe he was indeed too late.

"No. I moved East about six months ago. I'm working in New York now."

Fox bearing out Nick's surmise, said, "Mr. Nicholas works for Guy Parlier."

"Well, is *that* all?" said the grey-haired man. "Just the top firm in the business. Is that all? Just the top."

"Yep," said Del.

Nick smiled and blinked. He was searching for a weapon, a stick of dynamite, to blow the meeting apart, to make her get up and come out with him. To end the awkwardness of having to sit here in Fox's house and feel like a monitor or custodian or at best a fifth wheel. He decided to use what he had. Desperate situations, desperate remedies.

"As a matter of fact, I won't be there much longer," he said. "I'll be leaving in three or four weeks."

"Really?" said Grey Hair.

"Nick has a marvellous new offer," said Del. "Or rather an old one. He's going back to a firm he used to work for."

"Well, Del," he said amiably, as if he appreciated her interest but was sure she would want to be brought up to date, "as a matter of fact, I'm not. I've got something else in mind."

"Oh?"

"That's right," he said. "We haven't seen each other for a while and you don't know about it. I've decided not to go back with Peerless." He felt wretched about this, about pinning a medal on himself; but otherwise he knew she would make

him wait and wait and listen and watch until he was crawling with mortification. He had to blast her out. "I'm opening an office of my own." He sipped his drink. "Going in with a fellow I used to work with. Name of Bates. Quite independent."

The blond boy and the grey-haired man were both saying something about how interesting that was and what exactly was the kind of work they would do and Nick was making some sort of answer, he realized; but his eyes were on Del's face, pale, immediate, struck.

He was not too late. He was not at all sure of what would happen, but at least he was not too late.

They talked some more. But Nick knew the lance had pierced home. This little fragment of party was bleeding to death.

He knew her well enough to know that she had determined not to leave at least until she had finished her drink. Then he saw that determination crumple; rather than be left naked and defenceless, she sprang to her feet. "Geel! It—it is late," she said. "And it's a big day tomorrow. We've got to get to Philadelphia by one, Teddy."

"But, Del," said Grey Hair, "Mr. Nicholas was just going to tell us about the typewriters."

"Tune in again next week, same channel," she said. "Teddy, do you mind? You've got to be up and doing tomorrow, too."

"I suppose so." Fox rose to his feet deftly with an almost mocking smile and glanced at Nick. "I had looked forward to the pleasure of driving you home."

"But it would be silly, wouldn't it," said Nick, "now?"

There were farewells all around and everyone said what a pleasure it had been. At first Nick thought he might go out and wait in the car to let her say good night to Fox, but then he thought: The hell with that. I didn't come here to be generous.

"It was very nice of you to let me intrude," said Nick.

"All right," said Fox. He didn't say "Not at all" or "Glad to have met you" or "I hope to see you again." Nick liked him.

"See you tomorrow, Teddy," said Del.

"I'll come by about one. You can ride down with me. We'd better take both cars."

"We'll need 'em with all the Madam's clothes. Thank you, you old thing, for the party. I loved it."

"We all loved you," said Fox and kissed her. Not long, but deliberately.

She got in next to him, slammed the door and spoke immediately. "Mush, Nicholas."

"Yes'm," said Nick, half tense and half fatalistically resigned. She was there, beside him. When he had seen her first in Fox's living-room, he had taken for granted the fact of her being. But now he saw how genuinely she existed, the girl from whom he had lived apart and toward whom he had been tending. They were now plucked out of the world and set side by side. Doomed to a very certain doom, whatever it might be.

The car purred out of the driveway and attacked the highway with appetite. "

"I hope Mac can get home all right." She seemed determined to talk. "He was a little with the happy juice. Maybe we should have offered him a lift."

"Who's Mac?"

"Macdonald Verney. The grey-haired man. My God, you were talking to him for half an hour."

"I didn't get his name."

"You might like to know him. He's an importer. He handles a lot of fancy woods and textiles. I don't know exactly what, but he got Teddy the material for the drapes in that room. I think they're gorgeous. He's got a huge place in New York, a showroom. Teddy says it's stunning, and Mac invited me over to it. I think maybe when we get back——"

"Del. I can't hear a word you're saying."

She stopped abruptly. Then the quiet became silence. Clearly she didn't want the implications of silence, or any hint of implications. "Look, Nick, let's not——"

"How've you been, Del? Have you been well?"

She eased a bit. "Yes, fine. Just fine. And you?"

"Okay."

"How was Cuba?"

"Very comfy. Very lazy. How did you know?"

"Carter told me. He heard it from some friend of yours."

"I was down there about ten days."

"Good."

"How was Washington?"

"Not bad. Full of marble steps. The best thing was seeing Betty. She's wonderful."

"Yes. I know how much you like her." He didn't quite dare use the word "love" even in this connection. "I ran into Kenneth last week. He brought me up to date on things. I didn't even know you had left New York."

"Mm-hm."

That was all she said. Nick was afraid that the best he could hope for was to start from scratch.

"I—I guess it's almost two months since I last saw you."

"Mm-hm."

He passed a car that was idling along with a young couple in it. "A lot's happened since then. That's an inane remark, but it's true. A lot has happened."

"It certainly has," she said. "It's not inane."

Again he was quiet just as long as he dared to be. He said, "Do I know you, Del? Do I still know you?"

"I can't say, Nick. What do you expect?"

"Too much, I suppose. Everyone always wants too much. Everyone always wants it his way even though it's not fair. . . . I suppose what I really came down for was to tell you things. To report, sort of."

"To me?"

"Yes. There's reason."

"I can't see it. But what's all this about Peerless? And about Bates?"

"Del, that was cheap of me. I mean, throwing it out that way. I apologize for that. But I—I didn't like sitting there."

"Well, all right. I suppose I was sort of stringing things along. What did happen?"

He told her. Calmly, without colour or any hint of the bubbling and boiling.

"Hmph," she said. "You've been busy. You've had a real busy-type day."

"I don't feel it. I feel just out of the egg. Ferdy and I gabbed for two hours. Real college bull session. We got out the old shining armour and polished it."

"How does it fit?"

"Not so well. Some of it's too small now, some of it's too big. We saved a few pieces, though."

"I wish you luck, Nick."

Her tone made him feel dreadful. "Thank you." He said, "Del, I didn't come down to brag or boast. I'm not proud. I'm just happy. Or happier, anyway. I wanted to tell you. The trouble is, I don't know how interested you are."

"Well——"

"No, don't say you'll always be interested in whatever I do. Please."

She said calmly, "A lot of time has passed, Nick. More than the two months, really."

"I know. I could see. You've changed."

"I was changing. All along. It just seems to have hurried in the last month or so. I'm not someone else. I'm just—more me."

"Yes. Well, maybe that's true here, too. Only I found out why. The real reason why. I—I just don't know whether I found it out in time."

"I don't know either, Nick," she said, without feeling, looking straight ahead, and the black night seemed to him to grow more cavernous.

"I guess," he said, "I guess the last time we saw each other was—pretty horrible."

"Nick, there's no——"

"Well, anyway, no matter what, why should that be the last thing between us? Why should that be the last page?"

"You won't forget it. Neither will I."

"No. That's true. But we can remember it a different way. With something before. And maybe after."

"Nick. Look. We—we should get it straight. I haven't been sitting around waiting."

"For Christ's sake," he burst out, "I can see that, can't I? Even if I couldn't have guessed it."

She refused to say anything conciliatory, to give any slightest apology for having insisted on pride.

Again the quiet lengthened into silence. Nothing came into his mind that he could say. It was a long, long two minutes until the headlights groped for and found Carter's picket fence and driveway.

He put the car in the garage and, wordless, they walked under a black sky to the front door, over which a light had been left burning.

"Well, thanks for coming after me," she said softly within the sleeping house.

"Nothing. You wouldn't care for a nightcap?"

She turned on the bottom step of the stairs. She looked like a spirit, impersonal and haunting. "I don't think so, thanks."

"Or a last cigarette?"

"I don't really want one."

"Please."

Judiciously, with no touch of concession, she said, "All right."

The remains of a fire were still glowing in the living-room hearth. The room looked lovely in a kind of reluctant red. Nick hated to mar the colour, but he couldn't seem to take anything for granted: he switched on one lamp. He lighted

her cigarette and his. She sat in a chair. He sat in a corner of the sofa. They smoked.

"And you like your job?" he said. "You'd like to keep on at it. Those are your plans."

"Yes, I guess so. I don't see why not. As long as Liza will have me."

They sat facing each other but she was looking into the small fire. He felt that the earth was drawing away. This was the last minute. They might see each other again, but they might never again be as close as they were now. Their paths would lead outward.

"Del," he said. "Let me say something. Whatever happens. This may be the end. The finish. Let me at least say something."

She kept staring at the fire.

"I was never so glad of anything in my life as that fight we had. I left you that night feeling as if I'd thrown the globe off my back. As if I'd escaped. All I could think of, even with all the beautiful things there had been, was that I had taken on too much, that I had simply made a start toward another kind of wrong marriage, that you were too troublesome and unsettled and unsettling. Well," he said, "I didn't know the half of it. You sure are. It's taken me the whole time since then to realize what you meant that night. And what you had done to me. It's grown on me since. It's absolutely burst on me ever since I got back from Cuba . . . the feeling that I've entered a—~~a~~ compression chamber, with everything humming and speeding up in me, gearing me for a move to something new. I know now that you did that. I know now that I love you: Much more than I ever did before. Much more clearly. I don't think that any of the old things about you that frightened me are gone, necessarily. I just know I'm not afraid of them any more. Because I'm different.

"I don't know what I expect you to say," he continued. "Maybe it's just stupid to go on like this. But I couldn't keep from saying it just out of self-protection or ego or anything

like that. I owe all the change, the chance for a change, to you. And the least I could do is, well, sort of lay it at your feet and leave it up to you. So there it is.

"I can't even apologize for what happened between us," he said. "That would be stupid. It had to happen. Because we were what we were. I—well, as I say, I just want you to know all this. I guess you at least ought to have the right to look at it; and then wrap it up and throw it in the ash-can if you want to. I guess I owe you that.

"That's all," he said.

In a moment she stirred. She said still without feeling, "I think I will have that nightcap." He moved to rise. "No," she said. "I'll get it."

But when she walked past him to the sideboard, her eyes fixed straight ahead, he could see that she was trembling. A last log broke in the fire.

She poured herself a pony of brandy and as she turned to go back to her chair, her toe struck a footstool. She tripped and spilled all the brandy. She stood, stiff and still, staring at the empty glass.

Then she said quietly, "Y-you son of a bitch," and began to chuckle. Chuckling, she sank on to the footstool.

"Del." He moved to rise.

"No." She held up her hand in a familiar gesture—fingers outstretched, warding him off. She was still chuckling but there was no happiness in her face. "It's still me, underneath it all. Old Twinkletoes, Old Nifty, but that has nothing to do with it."

"Oh, Del," he said and again moved.

"No," she said again, softly but sharply, and the chuckle died. "Please don't." Then she said, more easily, "Please don't, Nick. Just because there's plenty of boob left in me, that doesn't prove a thing."

He didn't like standing over her. He sank to the floor and then sat back on his heels. The mishap had at least cracked the façade, at least she could hear him. . . .

"What can I do, Del? Tell me. I'll do anything. To get you back. What can I do?"

She shook her head. "Nick, I—I don't know that there's anything to do. I don't sort of have a price fixed in my fat little head and I'm waiting for you to pay it. I know how much you helped me. Things have—have been growing in me the last two months, too, and I know you made them happen. But that—that's not the whole story."

"Del, this can't be the end. It's too stupid, too cruel. If I ever wanted anything in my life——"

"Sure, I know, your whole life is a lot of wants and not-wants. You wanted Iris and then you didn't want her. You wanted your own place and then you didn't and now you do again. You wanted Wank and then no; you wanted Parlier and then no. Oh, everyone can change his mind and shift but usually most people think for a moment of—of how it's going to affect other people, and now it's me, the subject is me, and I'm not a job or a studio or an old hat. You wanted me and then you didn't and now you do."

"Boy," he said, almost breathless with shock; for he knew more than she did, he knew about Eve, too. "That's rough. That's really rough, Del."

And, besides Eve, there was Ferdy. Ferdy who had said something very like this. The hardest thing in the world, thought Nick, is to believe an unflattering fact about yourself. Really believe it. It can be told you again and again, but you just think that people are a little irritated with you or even perhaps jealous. But when the wall is down and the fact comes smashing in, it's as if you'd never heard it before. Between shock and nakedness, you manage to feel that someone ought to have told you.

"And you never thought of it like that, did you?" she said. "You never thought it could strike anyone that way."

"You told me once I was an egotist. I didn't know it seemed that bad. That selfish. For years my chief ambition

was not to trouble people. Somehow with some insidious alchemy, I guess it's been transmuted into not troubling about them."

"Well, maybe it wouldn't seem that bad if you hadn't come back. To pick up again."

"Del, Del, pretty, beautiful Del. I may be able to do something about the selfishness. I can try. But I can't do anything about wanting to come back. I love you. Whatever I say or do, whatever you decide, I love you and I will love you. That never faltered. I know that you and you do, too. Don't you?"

"Yes," she whispered, "it could be true. Because, in a way, I—I suppose it's true about me, too." She said quickly, "But it's irrelevant. Don't you see that?"

"No. There may always be things that aren't perfect between us, but we always knew that."

"Yes, and I finally got to think—you helped me think—that, add it all up on both sides, we were better off together than apart. But now I don't know. After that—that fight." Large, perfect tears began to find their way down her cheeks. "G-gee, Nick. How can we ever forget that? That—that was *terrible*." She said it with almost childish earnestness and it wrung him.

"Let me not forget it. Why should I? It was my own stupidity that brought it on." He took her hand and she started to withdraw but he said, "No. Please. I just want to hold your hand. Let me hold it please, Del. Just to keep from drowning."

She left her hand in his, a very tentative loan.

"I'm not going to make promises," he said. "I just know what I owe you, what I want to keep owing you. How I need you," he said.

"Love you," he said.

Swiftly she was on her feet, slipping her hand away. "That's all tonight," she said. "No more tonight." She looked at him and then she didn't. She darted out of the living-room and

up the stairs and he heard the door of her room close carefully.

The grandfather clock in the hall gonged out "No" on the half-hour and increasingly on the hour. As he lay in his bed, the echoes seemed to ring in his head so long that before they died, the clock spoke again.

There's no point in resolutions, he thought; all I can do is pray. Resolutions are silly because whether I make them or not I can never be the same. All I've thought about lately is how good things have become for me, how the world has grown larger for me. I'll never again be able to look at things entirely from inside my own head.

Although the truth remains: I am larger. The wing of the house that I closed off years ago is opening again. It seems to open automatically when you really want to inhabit it.

Ah, Del, he thought, be with me. In the strength and in the need. You've made both.

He not only didn't sleep, he never closed his eyes. As soon as it wasn't freakishly early—about seven o'clock—he got up and shaved and dressed. He couldn't wait to see her at breakfast, with others, to wait the whole morning out under a veneer of conversation. He glanced in the mirror, saw little to reassure him, then breathed deeply a few times and went to her room.

Her door was open and the room was empty. The bed had been lain on, but the coverlet had not been turned down. He went downstairs and looked in all the rooms, including the kitchen. She was not in the house.

He put on his coat and went out into the cool winter sun. He walked through the garden and couldn't find her. He crossed the barnyard and saw that a side door of the barn was open. He went in.

She was sitting with her back toward him, on a pile of bags of feed at the other end of the whitewashed, concrete-

floored room. Behind a wooden wall he could hear cattle stepping about in their stanchions, chomping, could smell their steamy heat.

He walked over to her. "Del, I've——"

"Oh!" She jumped, she seemed to bound into the air and come down in the same place.

He halted, and remembered. He smiled weakly. "You're a very high-strung girl."

She blinked slowly. "You said you'd wear a bell."

He stood there, simply having her in his eyes, letting himself be there next to her, enjoying it. "Del," he said at last, "you know how much I slept. I've been trying to think of more things, more reasons to give you. I can't think of any. You know what there is to know."

"Well," she said, staring at his shoulder, "I've thought of things too. I—I guess I'm an idiot, I ought to be facing the hard facts but all I could think of was how much you've done for me and how much I—I——" She broke off. "You see, when you're here, you're so *damned* here."

"Just like you for me. That's not bad, Del, don't think that that's all a snare and a trap and you ought to fight against it. That's our rock."

"Is it?" she said, looking up searchingly as if it were in his power to make truth true.

"Yes," he said surely. "Now it is. Now we can rely on it and return to it and build on it. Now that I—I see more." He dared to touch her arm. "Come back, Del. Come along. It gets better and better from here on."

Her eyes held on him and he wondered; and then suddenly she flung her arms around him. She was sitting, so her head was pressed against his chest. She was crying, he knew, but he just held her and didn't ask her to stop.

This must be how the happy dead feel, he thought: wiser and free and wishing that they had had the chance to live their happiness and freedom on earth, only I do have that chance.

They didn't kiss much, they just reassured themselves that

they were together and held each other hard. Now I am married, he thought.

"I 's funny," she said, half muffled, her head against him.

"All o a sudden I'm tired. Just plain bone tired."

"Me too," he said. "I've never felt so strong and so tired
in my life. Let's go back to the house and take a nap."

